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Review of Barbara H. Stein & Stanley J. Stein, *Crisis in an Atlantic Empire: Spain and New Spain, 1808-1810*

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## **BSPHS 40:1 (2015)**

Barbara H. Stein & Stanley J. Stein, *Crisis in an Atlantic Empire: Spain and New Spain, 1808-1810*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 795 pp.

In this comprehensive study, Barbara H. (†2005) and Stanley J. Stein complete their four-volume history of the Spanish economy and the Atlantic world. This volume picks up where the previous volume ended – Aranjuez and regime change in Madrid. In over 600 pages of tightly organized narrative, the Steins relate how the political crisis of 1808 undermined Spain's control over its largest and wealthiest colony – New Spain. The central thesis is that the efforts of merchants and monopolists in Cadiz, Vera Cruz, and Mexico City to preserve their privileged position in the Atlantic system exacerbated tensions between metropole and colony as well as within the colony itself.

The book is divided into four parts: Parts 1 and 3 focus on the metropole and parts 2 and 4 on the colony. Though each part could be a standalone monograph, the Steins effectively weave together the various narrative threads to highlight the symbiotic relationship between metropole and colony, underscoring the importance of an Atlantic context to understand fully developments in both Spain and New Spain.

A short review cannot adequately summarize twenty-six thought-provoking and richly detailed chapters. However, a brief synopsis of each part will provide a sense of the book's range. Part 1 chronicles the dynastic upheavals of 1808 that threw Spanish politics into utter turmoil. The only common denominator among all the political factions was their desire to maintain control over the colonies. The factions differed though over the means to maintain control and the proper economic policy to govern the metropole-colonial relationship. For example, the Junta of Oviedo wanted free trade, while the Junta of Seville, representing Andalusian merchants, wanted regulated trade. The Steins' painstakingly recount the political twists and turns between March and May of 1808. The narrative is complex, and their use of *fernandista* "crisis managers," a rather nebulous concept, to explain developments is ineffective. Nonetheless, the text demonstrates how the contradictory views over American policy prevented a more coherent Spanish response to Napoleon's seizure of the crown and ultimately undermined Spain's control over the colony – the one thing that all factions agreed on was paramount.

Part 2 examines the repercussions of Spanish political upheavals in New Spain. The colony had experienced renewed economic growth in the early nineteenth century. However, tensions were mounting between newly arrived peninsular merchants, who benefited from the introduction of *comercio libre* (1798), and more established peninsular merchants in Mexico City. The latter group controlled the powerful *consulado* of Mexico City. However, these old-timers were divided into two rival factions – *vizcaínos* and *montañeses*, which

## **BSPHS 40:1 (2015)**

shared power in the *consulado* by alternating elected positions. This system of elections effectively excluded newcomers from holding consular offices. Complaints about election procedures and questions over the *consulado*'s management of the *avería* tax led to viceregal intervention in the affairs of the *consulado*. Events in Spain brought the growing tensions between the merchant elite and the viceroy to a head.

In the absence of legitimate authority in the metropole, the Viceroy of New Spain, José Iturrigary y Aróstegui, decided to convene a local junta to help govern the colony. The *audiencia* and elite peninsular merchants, however, opposed any concessions to local *criollos*, believing a local junta would undermine their economic interests. These elite merchants had already bristled over the policy of *comercio libre* and the use of *gracias* (permits) – allowing foreign shippers, particularly Americans, to trade directly with colonial ports prior to 1808. They feared that any further economic reforms would threaten the Cadiz-Vera Cruz-Mexico City network of oligopoly. They particularly worried about the *consulado* of Havana supplementing the *consulados* of Vera Cruz and Mexico City as a clearing house for colonial trade. Consequently, in September 1808, with the tacit support of representatives from the Junta of Seville, the *audiencia* and peninsular merchants orchestrated the overthrow of Iturrigary. The Steins thoroughly discuss the plot, the coup, and the participants. They pay particular attention to the coup's unlikely leader, the Cuernavaca Valley sugar planter, Gabriel de Yermo. In Yermo, we can see how the interests of some *criollo* sugar planters dovetailed with those of peninsular merchants in Mexico City – both loathed competition from Havana. Yermo's leadership underscores that participation in the coup went beyond a simple peninsular vs. *criollo* dichotomy and that these were not monolithic blocs. Nonetheless, most *criollos* disapproved of the coup.

Part 3 addresses how these same mercantile elites undercut the efforts of the Junta Central and the Regency to reach out to Spanish Americans. One challenge facing the national government – whether Junta Central or Regency – was establishing its authority in Spain. Local juntas, such as the Junta of Seville, did not want to lose power and resisted the Junta Central's directions. Seville was especially angry with the Junta Central's decision to appoint colonial representatives to the Junta Central and its efforts to limit Andalusian hegemony in colonial matters. Military defeats and greater reliance on Cadiz to finance resistance to the French, however, stymied the Junta Central's and its successor's efforts to implement reforms that might have placated *criollos*. For example, in 1810, the Regency issued its *Manifiesto a los espanoles americanos*, authorizing the election of colonial deputies to the promised Cortes, but immediately faced resistance from the Junta of Cadiz, which sent its own manifesto to the colonies. At every turn, the promises of reform by successive metropolitan governments

## **BSPHS 40:1 (2015)**

remained unfulfilled. The ability of monopolists to block these reform efforts convinced many *criollos* that the colonial system was unreformable.

Part 4 delves more deeply into the growing alienation in New Spain. The cordial relationships between *criollos* and peninsulares in the provinces were shattered by the coup. Pamphlets critical of the coup circulated widely, and viceregal efforts to root out dissent backfired stirring up even more animosity toward the government. Despite growing misgiving, New Spain's peninsulares and *criollos* both responded generously to requests for loans. Support for the colonial and metropolitan governments, however, was eroding, especially outside Mexico City; many *criollos* began to question the metropolitan government's ability to resist the French and to sustain a consistent colonial policy. The Steins' analysis of the province of Bajío, the economic heartland of New Spain, effectively illustrates these shifts. This area was in the midst of recession in 1810, and metropolitan efforts to raise funds through Consolidación essentially decapitalized many small colonial merchants and shopkeepers in the region. Bajío consequently became a cauldron of dissatisfaction, and out of this cauldron came New Spain's revolutionary curates – Miguel Hidalgo and José María Morelos. Though the colonial rebellion of 1810 failed, the underlying economic and social issues that sparked the rebellion make clear that the colonial system was on its last legs.

The book is free of any major shortcomings. However, in various places, there is no citation despite verbatim quotations from documents (most notably pages 89-93). The failure to translate quotations from Spanish and French into English (and almost every page has multiple quotations) will potentially limit the audience for this work as well. These are minor qualms, though.

One particularly helpful narrative technique is the incorporation of mini-biographies of key actors throughout the book. The Steins succinctly describe individuals' backgrounds, foibles, and ambitions. These biographies help to illuminate the family webs and alliances that undergird the Hispanic world, the cleavages within interest groups, and how the conflicting ambitions of the mercantile and political elites undermined the transatlantic system in these pivotal years.

The Steins make it abundantly clear that the histories of Spain and New Spain between 1808-1810, which are often told separately by scholars of Spain or Mexico, must be told as a single story. All future researchers will benefit from a close reading of Barbara and Stanley Stein's meticulous work.

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