

**Letter from a gentleman of Madrid
to a lord of Andalusia (1641)**
in which he recounts recent events
in Portugal and Catalonia

[*Carta, que escribió un cortezano de Madrid a un Señor de título de Andalusia* (Letter written by a gentleman of Madrid to a lord of Andalusia), dated in Madrid on April 20, 1641, and published—after payment of fees and approval of the Bishop of Targa—in Lisbon shortly after September 5, 1641, date of the *imprimatur*. Printed in the workshop of Lourenço de Anveres, under expenses of Lourenço de Queiros (editor active in Lisbon between 1641 and 1647). Leaflet of 12 folios, body of the text in Spanish, permissions and fees in Portuguese, in *quarto*, 16 x 22 cm]

This epistle is of great historical value. Its anonymous author presents himself as a prominent courtier of the Spanish Crown, and therefore presumes of his access to precise information on the complex civil and political events of his time, mainly the revolts that took place in Portugal and Catalonia in 1640, which he describes in the body of the letter, as well as the military responses with which the Crown tried to contain disobediences. As a whole, the letter constitutes a very rich historiographical source, as it describes, in a first-hand register, very important episodes in the history of Portugal, Spain and Catalonia, framed in processes known as a) the annexation of Portugal by Spain, b) the Reapers' War, and c) the Thirty Years' War.

The context of the letter is of great interest. At the time of its writing and publication, a profound political crisis was taking place in the Spanish Empire, which at that time was the greatest military and territorial power in the world. Indeed, after the annexation of Portugal in 1580—through the dynastic marriage between Philip II and Maria I (the political union lasted for 60 years, until 1640, being its final moments described in this letter)—Spain came to have under its control the Portuguese colonial possessions in America, Africa and Asia, which added to its own, conquered by the kingdom of Castile during the 16th century. Nevertheless, and despite this nominal absolute power, at least in appearance, the Spanish Crown was then going through several decades of economic and financial crisis, which led it to extreme political centralization and, above all, to riskily increase the tax pressure on its subjects. These processes generated, especially in Portugal and Catalonia—regions traditionally governed with a high degree of autonomy—violent revolts against the Castilian centralism, which of course repressed these attempts. In any case, these rebellions culminated in a violent (and failed) military campaign in Catalonia, and with the secession of Portugal, which thus regained control of its colonies throughout the world.

The author's diagnosis of the situation in Catalonia is very precise and, of course, in line with the Castilian perception, according to which, "no es posible metelle la lealtad en el cuerpo" of the Catalans ("it is not possible to force loyalty into the body"). The author also refers to the "aiuda Franceza" ("French aid"), with which the Catalan rebels hoped to free themselves from the "alboroto" ("troubles") caused by the measures decreed from 1622 onwards by the Count-Duke of Olivares (1587-1645), favourite of King Philip IV (1621-1665). Olivares was, in fact, the main responsible for increasing the tax pressure on the region, and for "oprimillos, metelles soldados, sacalles dinero, romperles sus privilegios, y otras infinitas injurias desta forma" ("oppress them, intimidate them with soldiers, take money from them, take away their privileges, and other infinite injuries of the same kind"). The view of our Castilian author is out of tune with the Crown's policies, due to the cracks and setbacks on numerous fronts that those measures were causing.

Indeed, the main creator of the failed Castilian policy at that time was Don Gaspar de Guzmán y Pimentel Ribera y Velasco de Tovar, Conde-Duque de Olivares, whose fall from grace was precipitated by many of the events described in the letter. The text, a fierce criticism of Olivares, reviews the disasters to which his policy had been leading, from the disobediences in the Viceroyalty of Peru, through to the religious conflicts in Flanders (then under Spanish rule), to the military setbacks in Italy. All these, would count as the external front, but the letter also points out the delays and erroneous policies in Castile, Andalusia, Aragon, Galicia, etc. Aware of these difficulties, the anonymous author of the epistle makes pejorative analogies between Olivares and Tarquin the Superb, the last Roman king, expelled for his iniquities, and the Emperor Nero, associating Olivares with the excessive ambition of both, and with the moral decadence that they brought about. Such severe criticism simply explains why the text is anonymous.

Although it is not expressly mentioned, the "Corpus de Sang" stands out among the episodes of the conflict in Catalonia, and it is worth returning to it here given its symbolic value. Indeed, on June 7, 1640, during the Corpus Christi celebration, a small incident in the Ample street in Barcelona between a group of harvesters, day laborers, and some Castilian soldiers, precipitated a revolt that left about twenty dead. The rioters took over the city for three days, and resisted fiercely. This also gave rise to the so-called Reapers' War, a conflict that lasted for two decades. One of the hits of this long conflict was the Battle of Montjuic (26 January 1641, a few months after the writing of our letter), in which Philip IV's troops failed in their attempt to regain power in Catalonia, in the face of the brave militias of the city, supported by the French army. This event is, in any case, a milestone always celebrated by Catalan separatism, to which this letter can also serve, as it expresses the reasons why Castilian centralism should be repudiated.

As a result of this process, Catalonia—at the instigation of Pau Claris i Casademunt (1586-1641), the priest and jurist who led the Catalan resistance to the Habsburgs—named the King of France, Louis XIII of Bourbon, as the new Count of Barcelona (Louis I, 1641-1643) on 23 January 1641, thus becoming a French dependency and entering, *eo ipso*, in the Thirty Years' War, in which France was already involved.

The Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), perhaps the first great European war involving numerous countries and armies, also serves as the context for the letter, as the courtier who wrote it refers to the circumstantial military alliances of the Count-Duke of Olivares to counteract French military power. That war was, in fact, decisive in the 17th century and, in the case of Spain, it meant the beginning of its decline as a hegemonic power.

This document will be of great interest to researchers and historians dedicated to Modern European History. The letter will also be of particular value to scholars or collectors interested in the geopolitical conditions that led to the fracture, dismemberment and eventual decline of the Spanish Empire during the 17th century. It will also be of particular value in regional Catalan or Portuguese collections, or in institutes dedicated to national and regional political identities, and especially those that study separatist conflicts. The circumstances described in the letter—which possess a high level of precision and understanding of the existing power relations—allow a privileged access to that historical moment and its circumstances. Now, in a broader analysis, the letter can be considered a particular example of a rare literary genre, typical of the time in the Iberian Peninsula, namely, “arbitrismo”, that is, a series of economic and political writings that for decades were dedicated to diagnosing and warning about the structural economic and social problems of the Spanish monarchy, anticipating its decline.

Bibliography

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Engraving by Fernando Fernández Mota (1863-1929),
portraying the excesses of the Castilian soldiery
in a workshop in Catalonia



Corpus de sang, by Antoni Estruch,
oil on canvas, 1907, 262 x 404 cm,
Museum Art of Sabadell (Sabadell, Catalonia)



Francisco Villaplana, representative of the Catalan council, asking for help to Cardinal Richelieu, in an engraving of the time



The Catalan representatives in 1641 proclaiming Louis XIII of France Count of Barcelona, in a contemporary engraving.



View of the contending forces at the beginning of the Battle of Montjuïc (January 26, 1641), in a contemporary engraving.

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The Count-Duke of Olivares, shortly after his rise to power, in 1624, dressed in robes of the Order of Calatrava.

Don Gaspar de Guzman, Count-Duke of Olivares,
by Diego de Velázquez (1599-1660), oil on canvas, 203 x 106 cm,
Museo de Arte de São Paulo (São Paulo, Brazil)



Don Gaspar de Guzman, Count-Duke of Olivares,
by Juan Bautista Martínez del Mazo (1612-1667),
oil on canvas, ca. 1636, 127 x 104 cm