

**REVOLUTION AND COUNTERREVOLUTION  
IN SPAIN AND IN SPANISH AMERICA. RIEGO'S FAILURE  
AND THE LIBERAL TRIENNIUM (1820-1823) \***

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***Abstract***

The liberal triennium is presented as a crossroads in the History of Spain and in much of America. A crossroads where the trajectories of the European and American continents converge. In these years, respect for the freedoms of the citizens was demanded. The right to freedom under the law, freedom of opinion and association, freedom of political action and choice. These movements have a predominantly liberal and nationalist political-social character. The different national projects of the overseas territories have an explanation and the possibility of building a liberal regime on the Peninsula under the protection of the Constitution of Cádiz depart for the future. Rafael de Riego's coup against Ferdinand VII of Spain, was one more in the long chain of those that took place in the period 1814-1820. Majority of them failed but Riego finally achieved the objective. The liberal faction reached the power to carry out a series of political, social and economic changes from an ideological base opposed to that of the Old Regime. The French invasion took place, which came to reestablish the absolutism, Riego led the resistance in Andalusia at 1823 but he was defeated, captured and executed. Riego's dream disappeared.

**Key words:** *Revolution, Counterrevolution, Rafael de Riego, Spain, Spanish America, 1820-1823*

**Introduction**

In Central and Western Europe after 1815 the liberalism survived thanks to the principles spread among the bourgeoisie and the middle class, both individually and collectively. The echoes of the liberal revolution have not disappeared among the European and American peoples and are expressed through law and thought. Issues such as the notion of dynastic legitimacy and the institutions they inspire were denounced by the liberal heirs of rationalist and revolutionary thought (Martínez Carreras, 1985: 170).

In these years, respect for the freedoms of the citizens is demanded: the right to freedom under the law, freedom of opinion and association, freedom of political

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action and choice. There is a certain cult for the French Revolution and a series of literary, historical and philological works appear that condemn the arbitrary distribution of peoples decided by the Congress of Vienna and affirm the right of nations to their unity and independence (Hamnett, 1985).

In Europe, on the one hand, some people and territories under Empire domination aspire to independence, such a Greeks, Belgians, Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, and on the other hand, some separate regions aspire to unity, like Italians or Germans (Carantoña, 2014). The first revolutionary movements took place around 1820, having a light consequences in Europe, and majority of them were easily dominated by the immediate absolutist reaction. For example, the first declaration of independence of Wallachia in 1821 made among others by Tudor Vladimirescu has become a symbol of the Romanian national liberation.

These movements have a predominantly liberal and nationalist political-social character (Ochoa Brun, 2017).

They begin chronologically in Germany, where a strong agitation arises, especially in the university sphere and with the political purpose of forcing the various German governments to grant Constitutions, although Metternich's repression stifled the movement before it became widespread.

In Spain the revolutionary movement started by the troops of General Rafael de Riego that forced Ferdinand VII to reestablish the Constitution of 1812 (Castells, 1989). In Italy some revolts were succesful. In Naples a revolt broke out in July 1820 and in Piedmont the revolutionary agitation of March 1821 forced the establishment of the Constitution, but in both cases Austrian troops reestablished the absolutist order. In France, the Duke of Berry was assassinated in February 1820, attempting the uprising of different garrisons but that failed. In Russia, the last country reached by this revolutionary wave, after the death of Alexander I, the insurrection of December 1825 took place, which intended to transform the autocratic regime into a constitutional one, but which failed due to lack of preparation and organization, continuing the absolutist monarchy with the new Tsar Nicholas I (Martínez Carreras, 1985: 173-174).

The liberal triennium is presented as a crossroads in the History of Spain and in much of America. A crossroads where the trajectories of the European and American continents converge. A crossroads from which the different national projects of the overseas territories have an explanation and the possibility of building a liberal regime on the Peninsula under the protection of the Constitution of Cádiz depart for the future (Rújula y Chust, 2019: 15).

### **The Riego's coup d'état**

In 1820 the second liberal „push” took place (Cánovas Cervantes, 1930). Somehow, the liberals have learned the lesson of 1814, without support of the army was no possible to modernize the political system (Novales, 1976). Once again the hope of overthrowing the absolutist chains was renewed, relying on the Constitution of 1812 in the face of a Ferdinand VII who was no longer „The desired one”.

With the Riego expedition aborted, which was to bring aid of men and material to the armies fighting the insurgents, without the political or economic possibilities to reorganize a new one, the only thing left was the hope that the new regime established in

the American territories would be encouraged to lay down arms and return to obedience with a just government. There was no other way to preserve overseas possessions because an unpopular war could not be sustained between the armies that gave the liberals victory, with an absolute lack of economic means and a navy incapable of protecting trade.

Pacification was attempted with the cessation of hostilities and through negotiation through the overseas authorities, with a parliamentary representation, the dispatch of commissioners by the dissidents and the dispatch of emissaries with extensive instructions to reach provisional agreements on the unalterable basis of its union with the metropolis. While the Peninsula was preparing to undertake a fast process of political reforms, it was imagined that America would abandon the insurgency by embracing the new framework of Constitutional freedoms as a renewed pact of coexistence within the Hispanic Monarchy (Rújula y Chust, 2019: 10-11).

This public acknowledgment that a positive solution was far from being reached and the exclusion of the budgets of flows that were not those of Cuba, suggests that in some way the colonial empire was considered lost no matter how many efforts were made. In the dilemma between a dignified peace and a civil war of indeterminate duration and uncertain success, the first option was chosen without great security or hope of achieving it. Anyway, the declarations of the co-institutional system as a remedy against dismemberment responded, from this point of view, more to the need to keep the morale of the country and of the authorities that had to try it high than to the conviction itself, transmitting a faith that they did not have and maintaining the last hope.

The year 1821 marked a before period and after. The Spanish defeat in Carabobo in 1821 allowed the control of Venezuela by Morillo while in Mexico (Frasquet, 2008: 153-180), Agustín de Itúrbide relaunched the war process that would end with the first American military dictatorship. Gunpowder and bayonets reappeared in South America (Rodríguez, 1996; Idem, 2005). The American silver and gold sent to the Peninsula stopped flowing. The liberal Treasury was forced to increase the fiscal pressure, its situation worsened by the bad harvests of that year, and the royal insurrection began to take shape. In Europe the absolutist powers began to press for a constitutional reform in a conservative sense (Rújula y Chust, 2019: 11).

A distant coup in southern Spain that of Rafael de Riego, began the movement of 1820. At the beginning, it was unsuccessful, just as generals Francisco Espoz y Mina (1814) had not succeeded in previous years. Juan Díez Porlier (1815) and Luis Lacy (1817) or the so-called „conspiracy of the Triangle” (1816). However, in this opportunity, the neutralization was delayed in time, allowing the echo of the uprising to be spread (Rújula y Chust, 2019: 17).

Rafael de Riego (González-Pola de la Granja, 2006: 271-286), who had fought against the French in the War of Independence (1808-1814), revolts with his troops (the Asturias battalion) on January 1st in Cabezas de San Juan and advances towards Arcos de la Frontera, while Quiroga did the same with another rebellious army corps on the island of Leon and San Fernando. Anyway, the rebels couldn't enter Cádiz (Parente Rodríguez, 2013). The supports are small but also the resistance. The atmosphere of 1820 was not the same as that of 1814, and discontent was widespread. Riego proclaims the Constitution of 1812 taking advantage of the difficult situation in the Army joined to embark to America in doubtful ships and with the uncertain objective of ending the American insurrection. The important gathering of men and military supplies in the

Cádiz area created the best conditions for the coup d'état. In these first moments, neither the King has the strength to suppress the uprising, nor the rebels to triumph.

Some few weeks later the rebellion broke out in La Coruña, Barcelona, Pamplona, Cádiz and Madrid. The King ordered General La Bisbal to suppress the riots in the capital, but he turned his soldiers against the monarch and his clique. The Army systematically refused to obey the repressive orders and slogans of the throne. Two months later, on March 6, 1820, and when he was clearly losing ground, the King decided to accept the Cádiz Constitution, as can be seen in his famous manifesto of Ferdinand of March 10: "Spaniards: When your heroic efforts managed to put an end to the captivity in which the most unheard-of perfidy held me, everything I saw and heard, as soon as I set foot on homeland, came together to persuade me that the nation wanted to see its previous form of government resurrected (...) You have made me understand your desire to reestablish that constitution that was promulgated in Cadiz in 1812 amidst the roar of hostile weapons (...) I have sworn that Constitution for which you sighed and I will always be your strongest support (...) *Let us march frankly, and I the first, along the constitutional path*"<sup>1</sup>.

The King's response was a new turn to his behavior, that of opportunistic monarch, who in private harshly prosecuted the liberal ministers who, with Argüelles as the Head of the government, formed the first constitutional government that aspired to lay the foundations of a bourgeois society. On the other hand, with the outbreak of the revolution there had been a cantonal proliferation and federalism sprang up everywhere, organizing local Government Boards. Thus, the new government had as its first task to reorganize the national unity based on centralism.

Riego was favored to achieve his leadership (Martín Arranz, 1987; Idem, 2021; 306-329; Natera, 2001; Idem, 2014) by the historical circumstances that surrounded him, in particular by Romanticism and liberalism (Sánchez, 2018; Idem, 2021; Lloréns, 1979; Marco, 1998). He dedicated his speeches, his oratory, his proclamations and even his anthem to exalt the value of the people, for this reason he was committed to what his followers demanded (Flitter, 1995; Romero, 1994; Navas, 1990; Safranski, 2009).

Riego formulated a shared vision, an achievable and ambitious goal that pushed. He was unable to form an operational or decisive command profile, although he did initiate one of the most important revolutionary waves of the 19th century (Salinas Guirao, 2021; 318). To sum up, Riego -in the words of M. Alvargonzález Fernández (2017: 77-94)<sup>2</sup> - was a modern public figure, the object of a popularity that allowed him to personify the desire of many for a truly radical change.

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<sup>1</sup> The Spanish version is as follows: "*Españoles: Cuando vuestros heroicos esfuerzos lograron poner término al cautiverio en que me retuvo la más inaudita perfidia, todo cuanto vi y escuché, apenas pisé el suelo patrio, se reunió para persuadirme que la nación deseaba ver resucitada su anterior forma de gobierno (...)* Me habéis hecho entender nuestro anhelo de que restableciese aquella constitución que entre el estruendo de las armas hostiles fue promulgada en Cádiz el año de 1812 (...) He jurado esa Constitución por la que suspirabais y seré siempre su más firme apoyo (...) *Marchemos francamente, y Yo el primero, por la senda constitucional (...)*". ([http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/manifiesto-de-fernando-vii-a-los-espanoles-madrid-10-marzo-1820-986278/html/ad51f1c7-f35c-4cd3-81ca-451b091b5128\\_2.html](http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/manifiesto-de-fernando-vii-a-los-espanoles-madrid-10-marzo-1820-986278/html/ad51f1c7-f35c-4cd3-81ca-451b091b5128_2.html))-[check it, 28 February 2022].

<sup>2</sup> The exalted defense, although always legalistic, that he made of those rights and freedoms made him the enemy of some moderate deputies and politicians who sought to establish another

### **The revolution in progress**

Dissentions would soon arise in the liberal faction. Moderates and radicals had different points of view about the governance of the country. On the one side, the moderates were in favor of checking the Constitution of 1812, seeking to introduce an Upper House (Senate) in the political structure that would counterbalance the radicalism of the Cortes and also respect the personal prerogatives of the monarch. On the other side, radicals and progressives believed that it was morally necessary to preserve and protect the Constitution of Cádiz. In fact, the moderates came to power while the progressives remained on their periphery.

The three-year years did not give enough time to deepen the changes that Spanish society needed (Comellas, 1963). Many of its provisions have the desire to link and continue the revolutionary work of Cádiz, truncated when Ferdinand VII returned to the Peninsula. Among the tasks on which the triennium focuses, the following stand out:

- a) The elaboration of a penal code that responds to the egalitarian legal concept that had been defended in Cádiz;
- b) The territorial division into provinces is carried out;
- c) Ordinances are approved to improve commerce and agriculture;
- d) Tolls and customs duties were abolished to achieve lower prices of popular consumer products (but in 1823 it reimplemented them before the threat of bankruptcy of the Treasury);
- e) The economic management was based on knowing, first, the true situation of the country, for which it was necessary to collect reliable data and repair the losses caused by the war (Moral Ruiz, 1975). For this reason, the new Treasury plan was based on direct contributions, placing the burden on the large owners, but it was necessary to create new consumption taxes that made basic necessities more expensive;
- f) There is self-recognition as a power of second order and maintenance of peace, both externally and internally, as well as with overseas possessions.
- g) The socio-religious legislation charged against ecclesiastical privileges with measures such as: the suppression of the Society of Jesus, the reform of the regular orders, the reduction of the tithe by half, the confiscation processes on monasteries of extinct orders and the definitive suppression of the Inquisition.

The radical sector of liberalism rested on different bases:

- a) A sector of the Cortes. They ask that the legislative power protect the monarch and declares itself competent in various judicial proceedings;
- b) Patriotic societies (Gil Novales, 1976; Idem, 1980): they were accused of being inspired by the French clubs of the revolution, but there was a Spanish background. In these revolutionary clubs the Constitution and liberal newspapers were read, politics were discussed, and the absolutist ideology was pursued;
- c) The army of the island of León and San Fernando. It was an armed reserve that guaranteed the maintenance of the Constitution. Budget problems to maintain it caused difficulties later.

Many decisions were made in support of the people, in matters of justice and taxation, which ultimately became harmful to the most depressed sectors (Sánchez,

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liberalism agreed with the former privileged and governed by a text infinitely more conservative than the Constitution of 1812.

2012). The consequences of the measures adopted led to a decrease in income, in part due to the decline in economic activity, aimed at relieving the taxpayer and favoring production, exchanges and increased income. The country went into debt to carry out these reforms, but the short duration of the new regime, which failed to relaunch economic activity, prevented economic recovery and the reforms remained unfinished (Rújula y Frasset, 2020).

Under the protection of the split of the liberals, political clubs and secret societies arose. In fact, liberals split into two groups: *doceañistas* or moderates and exalted. In the first, some prestigious personalities from the Cortes of Cádiz appear, among them: Toreno, Martínez de la Rosa, Muñoz Torrero. In the second, in general, those who had not participated in the previous Cortes: Romero, Alpuente, Quiroga, Flórez Estrada, who adopt more radical positions to definitively eliminate the absolutist danger. For the popular masses, accustomed to centuries of tyranny, the political and dialectical openness between moderates and progressives was hardly an understandable novelty. On February 18, 1822, the King appointed Martínez de la Rosa as Head of Government, a hard-line moderate who sought the introduction of electoral limitations. When it seemed that certain political stability was being ensured, the monarch himself began to conspire. On July 7, the Royal Guard staged a coup that failed due to the indecision of the monarch. In other parts of the country, the restorative or absolutist uprising was also defeated.

### **The realist counterrevolution and the French invasion**

The existence in Spain of a liberal government, in a Europe plunged into the revolutionary wave as a result of the definitive Napoleonic (Castells y Roca, 2004) defeat, was a source of great concern in the foreign ministries, to which at various times requests came from the Spanish monarch about the need for a European intervention. Spain was a crack in the compact body of post-1814 Europe and seemed the “last stronghold of freedom”.

The king, who did not feel his person's safety guaranteed, soon became an element of the counterrevolution. The economic situation continued in decline and the country increased its national debt. The Cortes carried out two important administrative reforms that had as a common key the imposition of a much more demanding centralism than the Bourbon. The first of these was the division of Spain into 49 provinces, practically the same ones that Javier de Burgos would establish on the death of Ferdinand VII, and the strengthening of the corresponding bodies, councils and treasuries, which should allow better and greater tax collection. The second was the Law of Public Education, which established the three stages of education that became classic, primary, secondary and higher, setting the number of universities at ten and establishing identical study plans for the all country.

Three different elements that were normally dispersed acted in this counterrevolution. In the first place, we must consider the king, who throughout the triennium lived his experience as a constitutional monarch without the slightest desire for understanding with the Cortes and with the government. In the exercise of his constitutional functions, he favored the most moderate political options and tolerated

the subversive initiatives of the Royal Guard and used the veto to the limit permitted by the Constitution.

According to the doctrine of the Holy Alliance (or Santa Alianza), in the Congress of Verona, the European powers decided to restore order in Spain. Emboldened by the situation, Ferdinand VII dismissed Prime Minister San Miguel at the beginning of February, although a few days later he had to appoint him again to avoid a popular uprising. However, on April 7, 1823, the The Hundred Thousand Sons of Saint Louis (Cien Mil Hijos de San Luis)- (Rújula, 2010), crossed the Spanish-French border with the aim of destroying the Spanish bourgeois revolution (La Parra, 2007).<sup>3</sup> With an unresponsive Army, a favorable clergy, an enthusiastic nobility, a divided liberal political faction, and a bewildered people, foreign troops under the French Duke of Angoulême practically strolled the Peninsula. At that time the king was, in fact, a prisoner and was freed in exchange for the promise of the invaders to enact an amnesty.

The French invasion of the Peninsula in 1823 not only intended to restore Ferdinand VII in his power, as a part of the counterrevolutionary policy defined in the congresses. It was also part of a prestige policy promoted by the Bourbon monarchy to reclaim its place on the international scene (Martínez Carreras, 1985: 168). The manifesto of Ferdinand VII was produced suspending the Constitution and, in the midst of terms of theocratic and absolutist resonances, declared “null and of no value all the acts of the so-called constitutional Government”, in other words, everything that has been done since March 7 of 1820.

The liberal government was forced to evacuate Madrid and moved to Seville together with the Cortes and the king, despite the fact that the latter had alleged an attack of gout. The defeat of the government forces near Jaén forced a new transfer to Cádiz, which could be done by declaring mental health problems in Ferdinand VII and creating a regency in charge of the executive power. Once in Cadiz, the only battle between the French troops took place, after which the Cortes decided to let the king go free and negotiate directly with the Duke of Angoulême (Prados de la Escosura, 1979).

Ferdinand VII erased all the commitments acquired on the island just a few days before, opening a new time of blind and vengeful Counterrevolution that led the Liberals into exile or prison (Simal, 2012). Restoration without concessions was not the best for a sovereign who was about to exercise power in an absolute way (Martínez Carreras, 1985: 178).

The Liberal Government was dissolved after obtaining from the Monarch a promise that there would be no reprisals. With his usual duplicity, Ferdinand VII broke his promise. On October 1 he annulled the constitution and unleashed a relentless this time against the Liberals. One of his first victims was General Riego (Alvargonzález, 2017), who, unlike other high officials, was unable to escape through Gibraltar. Transferred to Madrid and tried for having voted to disqualify the King, Riego was found guilty of high treason (Alarcó Lecuona, 1999: 417- 440; De Burgos, 2013).

With the restoration of absolutism, Spain had to face a continuous crisis in which four types of problems appear (Fontana, 2006). The dynastic problem, which will

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<sup>3</sup> The 110.550 men, called Sons of Saint Louis, headed by the Duke of Angoulême, supported themselves by dividing the population itself. The Spanish were not as united as in 1809 and the French, as Bertier de Sauvigny pointed out, “came this time to defend the same cause as the guerrillas of 1808: the legitimate king and holy religion”.

have the Carlist party as its background. The political problem that has the liberals in the focus of repression and that divides the absolutists on the occasion of the amnesty. The religious question after the recovery of the influence of the Church and its struggle to dismantle the disentailment process of the triennium. And, finally, the economic problem that has as a backdrop the loss of foreign trade with the colonies in America and that will lead to an increase in foreign debt.

In other words, the Riego's Spain came to an end (Pérez López Portillo, 2005). After the victory of the absolutism, the revenge in this second stage of his reign was even more brutal than the previous one. Ferdinand VII opened a period known by the expressive name of the „ominous decade” (década ominosa). The so-called „White Terror” (Pérez Galdós, 2005), quickly claimed its victims, many of them among young 16-year-old adolescents. The return to order was being represented through a dramatization of the return of the monarch after the „captivity” of the Liberals and the recovery of the monarchical legitimacy that had been suspended while the Constitution was in force (Ramírez, 2014).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the Europe that came out of the Congress of Vienna was threatened by the progress of liberal and national ideas. The three revolutionary phases (waves) of 1820, 1830 and 1848, caused multiple concerns and tensions in the middle classes and the popular people.

Riego's coup was one more in the long chain of those that took place in the period 1814-1820. Majority of them failed but Riego finally achieved the objective they all pursued: that the liberal faction reached the power to carry out a series of political, social and economic changes from an ideological base opposed to that of the Old Regime. To the discomfort of the Army and the country in general we must add not only the disappointment of the liberals of 1814, but also that of those who thought that the king would fulfill the promises made in Valencia and, even, the discontent of some royalists that they were not in agreement with the policy carried out. The Liberals saw in 1814 how the structure created by them in Cádiz was collapsing and a result of it they were punished.

The king and the church played an important role during those years and became central factors in the defense of the Old Regime, and they could explain much of the processes studied. The liar and ambiguous king, Ferdinand VII, behaved with remarkable political skill, especially not to make any mistake that could be fatal to his interests. The experience of his uncle Louis XVI in Varennes, France, was very fresh and he did not want to be expelled from the throne before he had the opportunity to carry out a new coup. The clergy, on the other side, contributed to delegitimize the regime, reducing intellectual and moral support for liberalism. At the same time, it should not surprise us that the Holy See at Rome aligned itself with the absolutist powers and numerous clergymen formed among the ranks of the insurgents pursuing the horizon of an American Church.

When the French invasion took place, which came to reestablish the absolutism, Riego led the resistance in Andalusia at 1823; but he was defeated, captured



and executed by hanging.<sup>4</sup> After his death, Rafael del Riego reached a level of political mythos (Díaz-Carrera y Natera, 2021; 300-322), unknown until then in Spain. His symbolic role was crucial in the Spain of the first third of the century, rising as the character with the most charisma in the country (Álvarez Junco, 1987), until the political rise of Baldomero Espartero, with whom he was compared and who lasted longer (at the national level) because the effects of the triumph of this in the war were more durable and he himself outlived them (Cañas de Pablos, 2021:143-173).<sup>5</sup>

When the French invader gone, the fight for freedom became a civic cult for many Europeans, although the specific use made of Riego was adapted in each case to the needs of each national context and each specific political moment. It can be affirmed that Rafael del Riego serves as a reference figure when studying how the military martyrs of freedom were extolled based on their political involvement in the struggle to achieve such a goal during the nineteenth century in the European context and how he built a myth around them in which attributed qualities, real or not, converged with a legend based on political actions and behaviour (Cañas de Pablos, 2021: 168-169).

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<sup>4</sup> Over time, however, what survived in popular memory was his figure like a mythical hero in favor of the fight for freedom. The march that his troops played during the events of 1820, known as the “Riego march or Riego hymn”, continued to sound as a revolutionary anthem throughout the 19th Century and was declared the national anthem of Spain by the Second Republic between 1931 and 1939.

<sup>5</sup> The news that reached the European capitals about the vindictive policy of Ferdinand VII in 1823 generated a significant rejection in the liberal circles of different countries, which collaterally helped to widen the myth of Riego martyr outside his country with greater international projection.

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