Stanley J. Stein & Barbara H. Stein  
_Crisis in an Atlantic Empire: Spain and New Spain, 1808–1810._ Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. xii + 796 pp. (Cloth US$89.95)

_Crisis in an Atlantic Empire_ is the final volume by Stanley and Barbara Stein focused on Spain and its Atlantic Empire, more specifically on imperialism and merchants. Combined with their previous studies (_Silver, Trade, and War_, 2000; _Apogee of Empire_, 2003; and _Edge of Crisis_, 2009), they have amassed close to 2,250 pages of compelling narrative, astute analysis, erudite research, and what is, cumulatively, a remarkable biography of the Spanish Empire from expansion to implosion. The book under review picks up where they left off in _Edge of Crisis_ to interrogate in forensic detail the two crises that erupted in 1808 and which would result in loss of empire (or most of it): French occupation of Spain under Napoleon Bonaparte and abdication of the Bourbon monarchs. In 26 chapters the Steins examine how the metropole (Spain) and its most lucrative colony (New Spain) responded to the French occupation and the ensuing absence of a legitimate ruler. By grouping chapters into sections entitled “Metropole” and “Colony,” they allow readers to follow the way political meltdown occurred simultaneously in Spain and New Spain (although considerable reference is made to other key imperial possessions such as Cuba).

The central arguments made will be familiar to specialists in the field—the fissuring of colonial society and intensification of _peninsulare-criollo_ antipathies, inter- and intra-elite conflict, ambiguous and often disingenuous directives from the various resistance juntas, and the Spanish government’s dogged refusal to approve implementation of free trade in the face of the merchants’ lobby on both sides of the Atlantic, resolutely against such a move, and their support of the political status quo ante. As the Steins argue with regard to the latter point, “Spain’s unique form of merchant capitalism rooted in a monopoly that colonialism provided proved too profitable to modify” (p. 662). One of the most valuable contributions of this study, however, is the way it makes us look with fresh eyes at what we thought we knew and understood; this is done through the assemblage of meticulous detail based on impressive research conveyed in the Steins’ signature eloquent narrative style.

Although Spanish merchants and merchant bankers—“key instruments of colonialism” (p. 662)—and their preservationist politics are at the core of this study, it is also, as the Steins assert, about the collective mind-set of imperialists in Spain and New Spain, the operations of the respective “civil service” on both sides of the Atlantic, and its efforts to protect Spain’s traditional, monopolistic transatlantic trade system. Continuing with a plural-biographies approach used in their previous studies (not formally a prosopographic study but close
to one), the Steins both advance and nuance our understanding of colonial civil servants in the Spanish Empire. In so doing, they respond to anthropologist Johannes Fabian’s 1990 observation in “Religious and Secular Colonization” (History and Anthropology 4:339–55) that not only “the crooks and brutal exploiters, but the honest and intelligent agents of colonialism need to be accounted for.” The biographical vignettes are invariably laser-sharp: “Garibay was honest, unaspiring, uninspiring, and—worse—manipulable” (p. 591). There are occasional anachronistic characterizations that strike a dissonant note such as “unreconstructed colonialist terrorists” (p. 601)—the peninsulare businessmen behind the coup d’etat that ousted Viceroy General José de Iturrigaray in 1808—but overall the minibiographies of key colonial bureaucrats and military officials are invaluable.

There are two perplexing aspects to this study. The first is its lack of explicit engagement with the relevant historiography, particularly the most recent works. Such engagement is there but deeply buried in the narrative. It seems, for example, that the Steins take a much less sanguine view of the political events of this period than Jaime Rodríguez O. does in his “We Are Now the True Spaniards” (2012) and emphasize the more traditional line of the criollos’ perceptions of “the gachupines as the true enemies” (p. 623). The second is the decision to leave primary source quotations in their original languages, primarily Spanish but also some French. Given the generous quantity of quotations sprinkled throughout the volume, this adds up to significant amounts of text that non-Spanish readers will be unable to understand, making this important study much less accessible to historians than it should be. That said, no one can doubt the Steins’ singular achievement in Crisis in an Atlantic Empire.

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