The Catalan road - Camino de los españoles

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The Catalan road, also known as the Sardinian Corridor, was a route followed by the Spanish thirds in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, (in fact until 1714), from the Mediterranean to the Netherlands. It started in Barcelona or Naples to Genoa and from there, crossing the Duchy of Savoy, the country of Gex (Valserine), Franche-Comté and Lorraine allowing thirds - or other passengers - to reach their destination in about forty days.[1][2] At specific points, it can still be visited today and is known as "le chemin des Espagnols".[3]

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It must be said that this length of the road was when it was done by an army of about 5000 men who did it for days occupying an entire village when they sojourned. Charles V introduced the layings, where horses and drivers were changed and then the total duration of the journey to Flanders from a carriage or on horseback could be about twelve days. There are documents explaining that the Duke of Alba (the father, being at war with France..) "volvió a España por postas.." then, not being able to pass through France, the only possible way was the Catalan way.

A second route began to be used after 1622 due to the Duke of Savoy's alliance with France, which connected the Habsburg dynasty possessions in the Netherlands through Germany through Thuringia and the Hartz Mountains to the Thuringerwald, through the lower part of the Rhineland-Palatinate, in the former territory of Franconia through the Upper Palatinate in Bavaria and thence through the Alps in northern Italy, where the possessions of the Spanish crown more or less surrounded the Papal States.[4]

The historian Geoffrey Parker, in his book on the army of Flanders and the Way of the Spaniards (1972), describes the importance of the Way of the Spaniards in the supply of troops and resources for the Army of Flanders during the Dutch revolt and later times.[5]

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History

Detail of the land route of the "Catalan Way", with its main and secondary variants

When Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire abdicated in 1556 to his son Philip II of Castile, the Netherlands became dependent on a monarch they considered foreign and were submissive to Spanish politics. The economic needs of the monarchy led to a tax hike that generated unrest that was joined by Catholic intolerance against Calvinism. Disregarding the requests of the local nobility, a revolt against governor Margaret of Parma began in 1566. Philip II sent the following year a large army under the Duke of Alba to end the revolt. The main rebel leaders were executed, including the Earl of Egmont. The Court of Tumults exercised a severe repression that sentenced nearly a thousand people. The revolt could not be ended, as William of Orange put himself at the head of the revolt and, two years later, entered the Netherlands with an army of German mercenaries.

The southern regions did not support this new revolt and remained loyal to the Duke of Alba, but in the northern provinces, the insurrection reached great proportions. Alba ended up being dismissed after failing to put an end to the revolt, taking his place Lluís de Requesens, a supporter of less repression, in 1574. However, William of Orange had gained more power in Holland and Zeeland. In 1576 John of Austria was appointed governor. He accepted the claims of the Calvinists to theperpetual Edict and began to retreat to his army. But with that gesture the opposition did not cease, and the following year came an army sent by Alexander I of Parma, who defeated the rebels. Appointed Governor Farnese after the sudden death of John of Austria, the division between the north and south of the territory was accentuated. The Calvinist provinces of the North (Holland, Friesland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Gelderland, Groningen and Overijssel) were associated in the so-called Union of Utrecht (1579), declaring themselves opposed to the sovereignty of Philip II and declaring their independence.

At first, troops to quell the insurrection were recruited to the part loyal to the crown, the area of Belgium, but soon many more soldiers were needed, due to the wear and tear of the sieges. Cams were formed in other territories of the Habsburg dynasty to be sent to Flanders. However, the geographical location of the region made it difficult to move.

Sea trip - land travel
It should be made clear that the tercios were in the Mediterranean, the recorded expeditions left Barcelona or Naples. The transport of troops could be carried out in two ways:

By sea: From the ports of Barcelona or Naples to the ports of southern Flanders. This route was more dangerous because it involved crossing the English Channel, in English hands, risking ships being attacked by privateers aided by the Royal Navy. In addition, the Huguenot pirates of La Rochelle, allied with the Flemish rebels for reasons of religion, could also attack the navy, having, in fact, made incursions into the Bay of Biscay with a fleet of 70 ships. This route proved ineffective, and the Spanish were defeated when they tried to use it (see Battle of the Dunes).

By land: a slower but much more effective road, as it allowed troops and money to be sent to Flanders for almost a century, which meant that Flanders remained loyal to the Spanish crown despite the geographical distance.

Soldiers could walk the 1000 km (620 miles) from Milan to Flanders with an average of 23 km (14 miles) per day. Although maritime transport was much faster, capable of covering about 200 kilometers (124 miles) a day, the land route

was safer and shorter, whether leaving Barcelona (3,950 km) or Naples, since by sea it was necessary to go all the way around the Iberian Peninsula and the prominence of Brest in France, that is, both were about 20 days (3950/200) of navigation from Flanders. The Spanish Crown sent more than 123,000 men by land between 1567 and 1620, compared to only 17,600 by sea.[6]

The first "pan-European" path

Contrary to what its name says, Spain was not the discoverer or the first to use the path of the Spaniards, all sections of the route were perfectly known. Just as Hannibal had done with his elephants 1500 years earlier, traders regularly used the parts of the road linking France and Italy through the Alps, for the trade of goods between the two countries.

What the engineers of Philip II of Castile did in 1565 was to rethink it as a unitary set from end to end, some of its sections were redesigned and expanded, making sketches of a military nature for future users. All this happened at the time when Spain needed to transport troops to the Netherlands, which pushed it to take advantage of the passage through its own territories, adding some neutral territory.[3]. For this reason, the commanders of the Spanish armies have been given the merit of the overall design of this path.

During the global tour to go from Milan to the Netherlands by land (which was already used during the reign of Charles V), sixteenth-century travelers had to overcome many obstacles, such as crowning high mountain passes, crossing large rivers, lush forests, and paths full of criminals. Therefore, it was necessary to find a route that would outline all these obstacles, for a safe and easy place to travel there. The path of the Spaniards proved to be the answer, with the following journey through their own territories under the rule of Spain: Duchy of Milan, Franche-Comté, Burgundy, Luxembourg, allied territories (Savoy) and neutral territories (Lorraine).

The layout of the Spanish road was a great improvement over the previous system for moving troops through these territories. It must be said, however, that the maps used by the Spanish expeditions only had the information regarding military matters, excluding any other detail. However, this forced the armies to use guides and scouts when crossing the terrains they did not know, since their very generalist maps did not serve to guide them through them.[3] On the trip an average of 12 miles per day was made, in 1577 Spanish veterans returning from the Netherlands walked 15 miles per day due to the heat, while in 1578, they averaged 23 kilometers per day during a cold month of February.[3]

For military purposes, the Path of the Spaniards was first used by the Duke of Alba in 1567, and the army that last passed did so in 1620.

The "étapes"

The path of the Spaniards was used not only by the troops, but also by the merchants, and they all needed food and shelter throughout the journey. Shelter that was rarely given to those who traveled along the way, especially soldiers. Many times officers stayed overnight in a village near the road while their armies had to sleep under bushes or weak shacks that they themselves built.

Precisely the inhabitants of the towns along the way "were afraid of the passing armies" because they had often been victims of some robbery after offering their hospitality. On one occasion in 1580, the officers of the "Spanish tercios" in transit through the area occupied a house in the Franche-Comté which, temporarily, had neither furniture nor crockery, its owners had hidden them, as they were afraid that their property would be destroyed, burned or stolen.[3]

The military only used the path of the Spaniards once or twice a year, the rest of the time it was used by merchants. For this reason, military expeditions were seen as unimportant by some countries.[3] The military, however, used a system for supplying basic foods called étapes. This system was to be put into service after Cristóbal de Benavente's detailed proposal to the War Council in Madrid. But unfortunately, the Spanish king was not very impressed with him, so Madrid did not support him.

However, some "governors" thought that étapes were a good idea, so they created them along the way of the Spaniards, with commissioners sent by the governor of the Netherlands or the governor of Milan to discuss the details and set prices, so that suppliers were always paid for their services.

The first type of étapes was permanent and only existed in the Savoy. It consisted of a place where soldiers and other travelers had access to food and housing, at each end of "étape".

The second type was used in the Franche-Comté, Lorraine and the Netherlands, and was created at the time when a private contractor was available in advance, managing payments, shipments and quantities of food depending on the type and schedule of each particular military expedition.[3] This system allowed a much more practical use of the path of

the Spaniards.[1]

Consequences
Along with the obvious effects of the path of the Spaniards, such as an improvement in military movements, and the establishment of an adequate way to go to the Netherlands, there was a fact that contributed to altering the course of history. This fact was the collaboration of the path of the Spaniards to the spread of the Black Death. This important transport of people played a very important role in the circulation of the disease, and many civilians were affected in the villages around the path of the Spaniards.

Apart from this, the path of the Spaniards established permanent diplomatic agreements such as permanent embassies in Savoy and in the Swiss cantons, co-ordinated by supervisors of the Spanish government of Lombardy.[3]

The path of the Spaniards also inflamed the religious sense of Europe, because nations saw it as a threat. When wars of religion broke out in France, the path of the Spaniards brought people and money to help the French Catholics in their fight against Henry of Navarre.[3]

End

The Treaty of Lyon (17 January 1601) forced the Way of the Spaniards to be reduced to a narrow valley and a bridge over the Rhone. This loss of territory meant that the passage of the Spaniards depended on the approval of France. In fact, the last Spanish-Italian army with permission to use the path of the Spanish did so in 1620.
The Anti-Spanish Treaty of Savoy of 1622 ended with the passage of troops along the path of the Spaniards forever.[3]
Treaty of Turin (1760). In the northern part, Gex was separated from France by the valley of the Valserine, which allowed the passage of Spanish troops between Savoy and the Franche-Comté (and was named for this reason Camino de los Españols). This territory ceased to be strategic in 1714, due to the family alliance between France and Spain and the acquisition of the Franche-Comté by France.

The Treaty of Turin regulates both the border between the two states and the interchange of the cities Seyssel (one piece), Chanaz and La Balme located on the left bank of the Rhone, which were part of the Bugey, passed to Piedmont in exchange for the Valserine Valley: thus, the road between the Spanish Franche-County and the Savoy became French, and Gex ceased to be a separate enclave from France.

Cities on the Western Route
Éloise
Grésin with his long bridge, always grabbed the attention of the powerful. Often, opposed to the kings of France, the Dukes of Savoy were allies of the Spanish kings, kings at the same time of the Netherlands (they were originally dukes of Burgundy and Ghent). The path of the Spaniards began in Genoa, and passing through the commune of Clarafond, the Grésin bridge, the Valserine valley, the Franche-Comté and the Lorraine, the Spanish troops could go, thanks to their alliance with the Dukes of Savoy and the Dukes of Lorraine, from the Mediterranean to the Netherlands, without stepping on French territory.

Leaz
There is a suspension bridge that crosses the Rhone, in the village of Grésin. It can be reached by car from Grésin. On the other hand, in the direction of Éloise, on the Savoyard slope of the Rhone, there is only one dirt road leading to the bridge. This bridge was built after the water replenishment of the Génissiat Dam in 1948 and the formation of the reservoir, which flooded an old lower bridge. The old bridge had in the past been of strategic importance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In fact, it was part of the path of the Spanish, so the Spanish armies could cross the Duchy of Savoy to join the Franche-Comté (then Spanish territory), through Chézery.

Lancrans
Lancrans was part of the "path of the Spaniards", a Savoyard enclave between Bugey and the country of Gex (1601-1760). In 1858 Vanchy and Comfort separated from Lancrans.

Registered shipments

"Recorded" expeditions between 1567 and 1593

Year
Commander
Men
Exit
Arrival
Days

1567
Alba
10.000
20/06
15/08
56

1573
Acuña
5.000
04/05
15/06
42

1578
Figueroa
5.000
22/02
27/03
32

1578
Serbelloni
3.000
02/06
22/07
50

1582
Paz
6.000
21/06
30/07
40

1582
Carduini
5.000
24/07
27/08
34

1584
Happen
5.000
26/04

18/06
54

1585
Bobadilla
2.000
18/06
29/08
42

1587
Zúñiga
3.000
13/09
01/11
49

1587
Queralt
2.000
07/10
07/12
60

1591
Toledo
3.000
01/08
26/09
57

1593
Mexico
3.000
02/11
31/12
60

See also

Mount Cenis Pass
Pass of the Sant Gotard
Bernard Marcus
Francis I of Tassis
Laying
Alessandria

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