HISTORICAL PROFILES / Spain

Political background

From 1798 to 1939 Spain abandoned the ancien regime: political factions, sometimes led by the military, fought for power in a deteriorating economic situation. In the meantime, the country suffered three civil dynastic wars and, looking for lost prestige, was involved in international conflicts in North Africa, America and Asia. After a successful coup (pronunciamiento), the politicians in government tried to implement their reforms within the Constitution and between 1812 and 1876 five constitutions were proclaimed. The Bourbon Royal family's prestige had suffered so they were removed from the throne, but after a failed king and a republic they were reinstated. Most politicians belonged to one of two parties, either liberal or conservative. A façade of democracy was established and the country could attempt to develop. Moving into the 20th century new political forces – trade unions, nationalism, republicans – appeared on the political scene and upset the system. The Restoration crisis led to a new civil war in 1936.



Portrait of Queen Isabel II

c. 1849



Military Parade in front of the Congress of Deputies to Celebrate the Triumph of La Gloriosa [the Glorious Revolution of 1868]

c.1868–c.1872

Land and economy

In 1825 Spain lost most of its overseas possessions except for Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines (lost in 1898). In 1833 provincial division was established to facilitate government administration. But Spain lacked good roads or an extensive rail network to facilitate the movement of goods or people, a major hindrance to the development of a national economy. Most people were peasants. Some earned their living as labourers, a few owned the land they worked on and very few, the nobility and the Church, owned large tracts of land. Lack of water was the main resource that limited increases in the production of crops. The government sold not only Church lands but also mining rights, and many foreign companies came to exploit this throughout the country. Catalonia developed a textile industry to export to the colonies and foundries were established in the Basque country. Anarchists preached first to peasants and then to miners and industrial workers. Socialists followed and both began to mobilise against patrons and the government.



Map of Spain, with provinces

1845

Madrid, Spain

National Museum of Romanticism

Culture and education

One of the challenges of this period was education, because most people were illiterate. Before 1857 there was no free education. Moyano's Law was then introduced, which proclaimed free education for all children, girls and boys, from 6 to 9 years old and after that organised education in three levels (Primary, Secondary and University). Few resources were allocated to education by the government, but eventually the "Institución Libre de Enseñanza" was constituted to improve educational levels and teachers' background. This brought to Spain European pedagogical and scientific points of view and in 1907 the "Junta para la

Ampliación de Estudios” was introduced to develop research into science and culture. Foreign influences such as Romanticism eventually reached Spain. Not-so-new trends collided with old ways, becoming an exaltation of the glorious past. The loss of the last overseas territories influenced an intellectual movement, the “Generación del 98”, which linked into “Regeneracionismo” (Regenerationism) and developed ideas for the needs of the country: education, democracy and Europisation, while having a critical overview of the past and the reasons for the decadence of the Spanish Empire.