



Governance and power in the transatlantic postal system: the organization of the postal service in the Spanish Empire in the 18th century

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In the 18th century, European governments enacted numerous measures in order to control communication systems and institutionalize the Post. This trend was further reinforced by the idea of administrative and social rationality adopted by imperial states in order to press forward their political, economic and social reform projects, as well as to consolidate a solid, centralized bureaucratic apparatus, in which the Post played a central role. However, these measures were different from place to place, and had to adapt to local circumstances. This undermined the idea of imperial control, and made the ultimate aim – political centralization – harder to achieve.

This process rarely resulted in a direct and progressive increase in central power, leading instead to a widening of the margins for local action. In addition, the ongoing tension between local and central powers burdened the consolidation of imperial control overseas and the crystallization of efficient communication systems, which were also affected by international conflicts between European powers.

Communication was a crucial aspect to the functioning of the transatlantic empires. The circulation of information was essential in governing the territories and to maintaining social, economic, political and cultural relations in these empires. Furthermore, the systems that circulated information, as in the case of the postal system, produced modification in policies, practices and networks. All these aspects were of fundamental relevance in the formation and in the maintenance of European empires.

According to historiography, the postal service had a fundamental role in the government of the European empires. An important moment in the Spanish empire was in the 18th century, when, as part of the wider Bourbon reforms, the Spanish monarchy sought to establish a new model of sovereignty. The Bourbon monarchy included in its plans innovation in the mail system, which promised to allow the shrinking of the vast Spanish empire by speeding up communications and strengthening the bureaucratic chain of command. Nevertheless, these projects encountered obstacles and resistances, both in the Iberian Peninsula and in their overseas locations. All of these facts are essential to understanding the complex structure of a monarchy that has recently been defined as polycentric.

This paper analyzes the postal reform projects undertaken by the Bourbon dynasty in Spain in the 18th century between Peninsula and Spanish American territories, through primary sources in European and American archives, especially the *Archivo General de Indias*. The main research aim has been to try to understand the political and institutional meaning of the emergence of a postal system organized by the Crown and its impact at the local level. The analysis of the postal system records has revealed that the reorganization of Spanish American Post was one of the cornerstones of the reforms undertaken by the Bourbons, whose projects demanded improved information channels to succeed.

In this regard, the postal system became a veritable agent of change, insofar as it consolidated the political authority of the Spanish monarchy and paved the way to the implementation of different policies in their territories through the consolidation of official communication channels.



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