Irish Soldiers and the Inquisition, 1700–1750

New challenges for the Holy Office

The eighteenth century brought fresh opportunities to the Irish in Spain and new challenges for the Inquisition. The most significant factor drawing early eighteenth-century Irish migrants to Spain was war, specifically the War of the Spanish Succession. Beginning in 1701 and continuing for more than a decade, this conflict pitted the French-supported Bourbon claimant, Philip V, against the Habsburg candidate, Charles III, supported by the British, Dutch, Prussian and Austrian ‘Grand Alliance’. Initially, the theatres of war were in Northern Europe. However, because William III of England wanted to control the Mediterranean and shut down Spanish traffic with the Americas, an Anglo-Dutch expeditionary force arrived in Portugal in 1702. Its early successes helped coax the Portuguese into abandoning the Bourbons and, under the Methuen Treaty (1703), they joined the Grand Alliance. The treaty provided the British with the opportunity to bring the war to the Spanish heartland. Their longer-term strategic aim was to secure the entire Spanish inheritance for the Habsburg claimant, who was more likely, on the restoration of peace, to open the coveted Spanish American markets to British trade. By early March 1704 the Habsburg claimant was in Lisbon and military operations began in earnest.

Irish soldiers fought on both sides. The Grand Alliance Irish were recruited in Ireland or England, and transported directly to Spain. Some of these were Catholics, and were obliged to conform to Anglicanism on enlistment. The Methuen Treaty, however, made provision for Irish Catholics to be recruited by the Portuguese army. On the Bourbon side, the Irish were mostly Jacobite in origin and passed from France into Spain under the duke of Berwick. In the early stages of the
conflict, Berwick won some minor victories on the Portuguese front, but the Grand Alliance imposed itself. They took Gibraltar and profited from emerging divisions between the constituent kingdoms of Spain. Although Castile had accepted the Bourbon succession, Catalonia and Valencia were more circumspect. This encouraged the Grand Alliance to open a Mediterranean front. For a time, this campaign went well for the allies, with Barcelona falling in October 1705 and Valencia a few months later. When Madrid fell, Philip V moved his administration to Burgos. However, the Allies were overstretched and, by October 1706, Philip was back in control of the capital. In April 1707 at Almansa, near Murcia, the duke of Berwick won a decisive victory over the Grand Alliance. Although the war would continue for several years, by 1710 Philip V’s position in Spain was largely secured.

For the Inquisition, the Bourbon accession and the wars exacerbated deep-rooted difficulties. Financially, the institution had been in difficulty for some time. Throughout the seventeenth century, its revenue from confiscations had gradually dried up, to such an extent that in 1677 a major retrenchment of the organization was mooted. It failed to materialize, but the financial situation continued to deteriorate. On his accession, Philip V did not envisage changing the status of the institution. The social and institutional roles of the Holy Office were simply too entrenched and too important to the monarchy and the state for such drastic action. However, his government did favour reducing staff numbers. At the same time, the Inquisition, like the Spanish clergy in general, had taken sides in the succession dispute, and with the return of both the Suprema and monarch to Madrid in 1706 Bourbon retrenchment was accompanied by purges of Habsburg sympathizers.

Fundamentally, the challenge for the early eighteenth-century Holy Office was to defend and at the same time redefine its role within the new Bourbon administration. On one level this entailed reiterating its historic role as the regime’s ideological police. On another it meant exploring fresh ways of responding to the monarchy’s current needs. In this context the wars, and the threat they represented to the dynasty and the Spanish state, were a godsend. As the country flooded with combatants, deserters and prisoners of war, many of them heretics, the Inquisition deftly stepped in, ostensibly to staunch the flow of religious and ideological error. At the same time, it reconciled the incoming heretics, many of whom were Irish, and made them available for military service on the Bourbon side. With its own army of mobile military chaplains and commissioners at large, the Inquisition operated as a virtual naturalization service for the Bourbon military machine in