Great Britain and the Recognition of the River Plate

On 6 April 1823 French troops invaded Spain for the second time in fourteen years, seeking to restore Ferdinand VII’s absolute powers and to end the Constitutionalists’ rule. This measure had negative repercussions among the other members of the Holy Alliance, especially in Great Britain. From this moment Britain’s Latin American policy would take a more consistent course. Canning was at this stage clearly set against the Holy Alliance. The fact that Austria, Prussia, and Russia reacted negatively against the French occupation of Spain did not impress him. It was clear that these nations were not against France for intervening in Spain, but for not having done so in concert with the other members of the Alliance.¹ But such concertation was precisely what provoked Canning’s criticism of the Holy Alliance. He was insistent that his Government should adopt a more independent stand, and therefore preferred a policy of every nation for itself.²

Spanish America became a crucial issue for Canning, and would from now on play a prominent role in Britain’s policy towards the Alliance and, most especially, towards France. As in 1808, fears arose in England concerning the future policy of France in Spanish America. The terrifying prospect of French predominance in South America was one of the main reasons why Canning accelerated his policy in favour of Spanish American interests from 1823 onwards. Canning’s initial policy in this area, as seen in the previous chapter, was commercial and strategic, and fundamentally designed to preserve the balance of power against the United States, whose growing commercial expansion was coming to be regarded as a menace to the interests of Britain and Europe.³
The major obstacles Canning had to overcome in England before establishing closer relations with the Spanish American states were the lack of support and the suspicions of members of the Government. This reluctance was shared by the King himself and, not surprisingly, by the Duke of Wellington. The animosity and lack of enthusiasm of the latter had already been seen at Verona, when he failed to put to the other European representatives a strong argument in favour of Castlereagh’s new approach towards Spanish American recognition. The Duke’s position towards South America was best summed-up by himself some years later, when he expressed that ‘I always had a horror of revolutionising a country for a political object. I always said, if they rise themselves, well and good, but do not stir them up; it is a fearful responsibility.’ This line of reasoning was shared by most of his ultra-Tory friends.

Canning gradually began to exploit the situation in Europe, provoked by the French intervention in Spain, in favour of his Spanish American policy. The most notable example of this line of conduct was manifested on 9 October 1823, when Canning met Prince Polignac, the French Ambassador in London. By May the French Army had reached Madrid, and had managed to suppress the Constitutionalist faction. One of the dilemmas now facing the French Government was how to deal with the Spanish American colonies. France was only too aware that Britain had already established commercial links with some of the emancipated colonies, and that she was now considering recognizing their independence in order to enhance and consolidate those relations.

France was also interested in furthering commercial relations with the ex-colonies, and realized the disadvantages which would arise from prior British recognition. On the other hand, France was clearly in no position to acknowledge Spanish American independence, given the close alliance it maintained with the Spanish Crown. The French Government authorized Polignac to seek a secret meeting with Canning in order to find a possible solution. It was clearly also in Britain’s interest to prevent any possible French or Spanish interference in their commercial relations with Spanish America. The meeting between Canning and Polignac was in fact due to Wellington’s initiative, for it was he who first suggested that such a meeting would be the best way to sort out the differences