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Spain and Russia in the Life of Agustin de Betancourt

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Abstract: The article examines the main stages of the life and activity of Spanish engineer Agustin de Betancourt who exerted a significant influence on the development of engineering in Russia at the beginning of the XIX century and made a significant contribution to the formation of the country's cultural heritage. Particular attention is paid to the poorly studied aspects of his biography: the reasons for moving from Spain to Russia and the role played by Russian ambassador to Madrid Ivan Muravyov-Apostol in the move, as well as specification of some previously unknown details of his stay in the Russian Empire. Based on the documents from Russian archives (the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, the State Archive of the Russian Federation) and Spanish archives (the National Historical Archive, the General Archive of the Indies, the Historical Archive of the Nobility), on the documents from Orotava Foundation in the Canary Islands, as well as on memoirs, the study traces the peculiarities of Agustin de Betancourt's relationship with Emperor Alexander I, whose favorable disposition initially granted Betancourt carte-blanche in his work. The author comes to the conclusion that the disgrace of Agustin de Betancourt led to the "oblivion" of his contribution to the architectural and engineering image of St. Petersburg for almost a century. It is proved that apart from the monarch's disgrace, a certain role was played by architect Auguste de Montferrand for this disgrace, who had grabbed the credit for his joint work with the Spanish engineer for himself.

Keywords: Russian-Spanish relations, Filipp Vigel, Institute of Engineers of Communication Routes, St. Petersburg development projects, Committee on Buildings and Hydraulic Works

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Испания и Россия в судьбе Агустина де Бетанкура

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Аннотация: Исследуются основные этапы жизни и деятельности испанского инженера Агустина де Бетанкура, который оказал значительное влияние на развитие инженерного дела в России в начале XIX в. и внес заметный вклад в формирование культурного наследия страны. Особое внимание уделяется малоизученным моментам его биографии: причинам переезда из Испании в Россию и роли в этом российского посланника в Мадриде И.М. Муравьева-Апостола, уточнению некоторых ранее неизвестных деталей его пребывания в Российской империи. На основе документов из российских (АВП РИ, ГА РФ) и испанских архивов (Национального исторического архива, Генерального Архива Индий, Исторического архива дворянства), документов канарского Фонда Оротавы, а также мемуарной литературы прослежены особенности отношений

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Бетанкура с императором Александром I, благосклонное отношение которого обеспечило знаменитому испанцу полный *carte-blanc* в работе. Автор приходит к выводу, что опала Агустина де Бетанкура привела к «забвению» его вклада в архитектурно-инженерный облик Санкт-Петербурга практически на столетие. Доказывается, что помимо монаршей немилости определенную роль сыграл и французский архитектор Огюст де Монферран, фактически присвоивший себе единичную славу от совместных работ с испанским инженером.

Ключевые слова: российско-испанские отношения, Филипп Вигель, Институт инженеров путей сообщения, проекты застройки Петербурга, Комитет для рассмотрения проектов строительных и гидравлических работ

Заявление о конфликте интересов: Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Introduction

Relevance. The history of relations between Russia and Spain has a long-standing tradition, dating back to the XVIII century. The issue of Russian-Spanish cooperation remains relevant to this day. In this regard, of particular interest is the life and fate of Spanish engineer and architect Agustin de Betancourt, who spent fifteen years in Russia and made a great contribution to its cultural and historical heritage. Betancourt designed the Moscow Manezh building, found an engineering solution for the wooden roof of the building which was advanced at that time, and built the Nizhny Novgorod Fair. In St. Petersburg, he built the wooden arched Kamennostrovsky Bridge over the Malaya Nevka River, the first sawmill on the Okhta River equipped with steam engines, which he had designed, the Isaakievsky ponton bridge, which connected the banks of the Neva River from St. Isaac's Cathedral to the building of the Twelve Collegia, and many others. Betancourt proposed a new engineering solution for the construction of St. Isaac's Cathedral and invented a unique method for building monolithic columns on its dome; later Montferrand did the same when constructing the Alexander Column on the Winter Palace square¹. However, after his death in 1824, due to the efforts of the entourage of Alexander I, the name of the Spanish engineer was buried in oblivion².

Elaboration of the problem. The period of Agustin de Betancourt's life (1808–1824) in Russia has not been studied thoroughly. Even less is known about the events related to his move from Madrid to St. Petersburg. F. Vigel, Betancourt's secretary in St. Petersburg mentions in his memoirs the role of Russian envoy to the Madrid court I.M. Muravyov-Apostol in these events, but he does not explain what exactly this role was³. Some researchers also noted this thesis, but no one revealed the details.

The purpose of the study is to reconstruct the main stages of the life and work of Spanish engineer Agustin de Betancourt and assess his contribution to the development of engineering in Russia and the formation of the country's cultural heritage.

Source base. The documents found in the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire which contain the correspondence of I.M. Muravyov-Apostol with Minister of Foreign Affairs A.J. Czartoryski shed light on the events of 1803–1805. Some of this correspondence was published in an essay dedicated to the activities of Muravyov-Apostol⁴.

¹ A.N. Bogolyubov, J.A. García Diego, "Agustín de Betancourt como arquitecto y urbanista," *Llull: Revista de la Sociedad Española de Historia de las Ciencias y de las Técnicas* 9, no. 16–17 (1986): 39–41.

² S. Padrón Acosta, *El ingeniero Agustín de Béthencourt y Molina* (La Laguna de Tenerife: Instituto de Estudios Canarios, 1958), 33, 47.

³ F.F. Vigel, *Zapiski* [Notes] (Moscow: Zakharov Publ., 2000), 208.

⁴ O.V. Volosyuk, "Ivan Matveevich Muravyov-Apostol (1802–1804)," in *Rossiiskie diplomaty v Ispanii. 1667–2017* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia Publ., 2016), 89–98.

There were introduced into scientific use these, as well as other previously unpublished documents from the State Archive of the Russian Federation (correspondence between Muravyov-Apostol and his wife who had been in Paris with their children from 1803), from the Spanish archives: the National Historical Archive, the General Archive of the Indies, the Historical Archive of the Nobility, from the Canary Islands Cultural Foundation of Engineering and Architecture named after Betancourt y Molina, as well as the private Archive of the heirs of the Betancourt-Castro Family, which is in the Canary Islands Foundation for the History of Science in the city of Orotava. It made it possible to clarify previously unknown episodes in the life of Betancourt, which contributes to the increase in scientific knowledge about his activities in the Russian Empire and his contribution to the cultural and historical heritage of Russia.

The Muravyov family and love of mathematics

When Betancourt arrived in Russia in 1808, he was already well-known in Europe and enjoyed well-deserved recognition as an outstanding engineer and inventor. However, the history of relations between Betancourt and Russia began neither in 1808, when the Spanish engineer arrived in St. Petersburg, nor in 1803, when he was first introduced to Russian envoy I.M. Muravyov-Apostol in Madrid⁵. It began much earlier, when I.M. Muravyov-Apostol's father, a military engineer, General M.A. Muravyov was thinking about education for his son.

He wanted Ivan to study engineering. At that time, at the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences there worked famous Swiss mathematician L. Euler, and in order to improve his financial situation, he conducted classes with students. From 1767, he began to provide board and give lessons to young noblemen. European education was held in high esteem among the Russian nobility: the Eulers' boarding school had an excellent reputation, and it was quite difficult to become a student in it. In 1777, General Muravyov came to the boarding school and strongly asked the Eulers to admit his only son to their school. Muravyov was ready to accept any conditions, and finally the Eulers agreed⁶.

The knowledge he had acquired proved useful to I.M. Muravyov-Apostol when he became the Russian envoy to Spain. Upon his arrival in Madrid, he decided to write a report on the state of engineering in Spain, the condition of hydraulics, roads and bridges. It was Paul I who had tried to organize the work of the engineering department in Russia. In 1798, he established the Department of Water Communications, which from 1801 was headed by Count N.P. Rumyantsev, an old acquaintance of Muravyov-Apostol. After the accession of Alexander I, within the State Military Collegium there was created the Engineering Department. It was for this department that the Russian envoy collected information, indicating that if his notes deserved the sovereign's attention, he was ready to send to Russia not only drawings, but also models of various engineering structures⁷. Explaining this initiative, the Russian envoy informed the emperor:

I got closely acquainted with the man who is in charge of these works, and I have the opportunity to present the clearest and most complete description, having the full confidence of <...> the most knowledgeable mechanic not only in Spain, but in Europe⁸.

The mechanic's name was Agustin de Betancourt.

⁵ O.V. Volosyuk, C. Camarero, "Ispantsy na russkoi sluzhbe: Agustin de Betancourt [Spaniards in Russian service: Agustin de Betancourt]," in *Ispaniia i Rossiia: diplomatiia i dialog kultur* (Moscow: Indrik Publ., 2018), 177–178.

⁶ R.M. Mumentaler, *Shveitsarskiiie uchonye v Sankt-Peterburgskoi akademii nauk. XVIII vek* [Swiss scientists at the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences. XVIII century] (St. Petersburg: Nestor-Istoria Publ., 2009), 176.

⁷ Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Imperii (Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire – AVPRI), f. Chancellery. 1803, d. 7498, l. 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 9.

Betancourt in Spain

Agustin de Betancourt y Molina was born on February 1, 1758 in Orotava on the island of Tenerife (Canary Islands) to a noble and educated family. His father Agustin de Betancourt y Jaquez was lieutenant general in the royal army, and his mother Leonor de Molina Briones was the daughter of Marquis de Villafuerte; she got excellent education and devoted her life to raising children. Agustin got primary education at home and continued his studies at the monastery of San Domingo in Orotava. In 1777, as a cadet, he joined the local guard, and in May 1778 he was awarded the rank of lieutenant of infantry. A few months later he went to the continent, where he entered the Royal School of San Isidro, and later the Royal Academy of San Fernando in Madrid⁹. It was then that the young engineer came in view of Spanish Secretary of State J. Monino, Count de Floridablanca. This position corresponded to the status of Prime Minister, and Floridablanca bore the major burden at the Department of Foreign Affairs. Nevertheless, as Russian envoy to Madrid S.S. Zinoviev informed Petersburg, “his favorite activities were projects for improving roads, digging canals, that is, various works for the benefit of the kingdom.” In 1774, in Murcia there began the construction of a canal for irrigating fields and gardens, and in 1785 – the Canal of Aragon,

the construction of which began many years ago, but which, under the previous government, did not progress at all due to a lack of funds <...>, wrote Zinoviev. At present, thanks to the efforts of Count de Floridablanca, it is being carried out with great success¹⁰.

In April 1783, the minister sent a group of engineers there to explore the area; young Betancourt was among them¹¹. Based on the results of his work, Betancourt prepared a “Note,” and Floridablanca decided not to lose sight of the young scientist and soon entrusted him with examining the condition of the quicksilver mines in Almaden, and then sent him to France, where he spent almost six years¹².

In France, Betancourt established friendly relations with outstanding Spanish and French scientists, with many of whom he would further maintain relations. Among them was Pedro de Alcantara, Duke of Infantado, a representative of one of the aristocratic families of Spain (who like Betancourt in his youth was engaged in canal construction projects)¹³, as well as famous watchmaker Abraham-Louis Breguet, with whom Betancourt made a large number of technical discoveries and inventions. Returning to Spain, the scientist brought a collection of models and drawings, machines and mechanisms, which became the basis of the collection of the Royal Cabinet of Machines, which he created in Madrid in 1792¹⁴. In the same year, he was awarded the title of knight of the prestigious Order of Santiago¹⁵.

Floridablanca patronized the young and talented engineer throughout his time in power. Even the resignation of the minister did not hinder Betancourt's advancement: specialists with technical education were highly valued in Spain. In 1793, he gained a scholarship to

⁹ A. Rumeu de Armas, *Ciencia*, 29–30.

¹⁰ O.V. Volosyuk, *Vneshnyaya politika Ispanii v XVIII veke: stanovleniie ispano-russkikh otnoshenii* [Foreign policy of Spain in the XVIII century: the establishment of Spanish-Russian relations] (Moscow: RUDN Publ., 2011).

¹¹ A. Rumeu de Armas, *Ciencia*, 32–34.

¹² E. Rúa Alvarez, “Spanish engineering of the late 18th century. Augustin de Betancourt y Molina,” *Bulletin of PGUPS*, no. 1-2 (2008): 61; I. González Tascón, J. Fernández Pérez, “Agustín de Betancourt y las minas de mercurio de Almadén,” in *Betancourt. Los inicios de la ingeniería moderna* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios y Experimentación de Obras Públicas, 1996), 55–69.

¹³ E. La Parra Lopez, *La alianza de Godoy con los revolucionarios* (Madrid: CSIC, 1992), 123.

¹⁴ A. Rumeu de Armas, *Ciencia*, 65–74.

¹⁵ Archivo Histórico Nacional (AHN), 1791. OM-Expedientillos, n. 8548; 1792. OM-Expedientillos, n. 18464.

travel to England. There, at the request of the alcalde of Havana, Count Casa Montalvo he designed two steam engines for use in the sugar factories of Cuba. In 1796, Betancourt “whose knowledge could contribute to the prosperity of the colony” was invited by L. de las Casas, the governor of Havana to Cuba to test these machines and to build canals and roads on the island¹⁶. However, in August 1796, Great Britain broke off relations with Spain, and Betancourt hastily left for his homeland. In June 1797, he boarded a ship bound for Cuba, but a day after leaving the port the ship was captured by an English frigate. The English confiscated the scientist’s instruments and books, and the passengers were released. Betancourt went to Paris, where together with Breguet he designed an optical telegraph, and after returning to Spain in November 1798, he began installing an optical telegraph line between Madrid and Cadiz. In 1799, he established the General Inspectorate of Roads and Canals in Spain, and a year and a half later he became its director¹⁷.

In November 1802, Betancourt opened the School of Road and Canal Engineers, which operates in Madrid to this day. Betancourt spent the next few years organizing its work and participating in the most important projects of the time: the construction of the Canal of Castile and the arch dam in Lorca, and the work to change the course of the Genil and Cubillas rivers in the valley of Granada, where the royal residence of Soto de Roma was located. There, as a result of massive deforestation, the bulk of the trees and shrubs were destroyed, which led to frequent floods that washed away crops. In 1795, Charles IV transferred ownership of Soto to new Secretary of State Manuel Godoy, Duke of Alcudia, who in January 1803 sent Betancourt to Granada with orders to eliminate the problems that had arisen. However, Don Manuel did not like Betancourt’s proposals, which led to a conflict between them, and in October 1805 Godoy removed Betancourt from managing the project and transferred it to military engineers¹⁸. The disgrace of the first minister who wielded more power in Spain than Spanish King Charles IV and who was extremely touchy and vindictive actually meant the end of Betancourt’s career in his homeland. Godoy, the favorite of Queen Maria-Louise who believed in his complete permissiveness was an extremely dangerous opponent. Given that the queen managed to dismiss all-powerful minister Floridablanca in 1792, as Zinoviev reported at the time¹⁹, then it would not have been difficult for her to ruin Betancourt’s career. This is what Muravyov-Apostol meant when he wrote that Betancourt “like all people who have feelings is disappointed with what is happening in this country.”²⁰

By that time the fateful acquaintance had already taken place.

Spanish scientist and Russian diplomat

Betancourt’s name was first mentioned by Muravyov-Apostol in a letter to Chancellor A.R. Vorontsov on March 21, 1803, which he sent to St. Petersburg with Count Ya.O. Lambert, the embassy secretary. Vorontsov was ill in his last years of service, and he delegated some of his assignments to A.J. Czartoryski who held the position of Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. He reported to Alexander I on Muravyov’s dispatch. The Emperor looked with favor on the Russian diplomat’s initiative and ordered that the Spanish engineer be “admonished” that

there would be no difficulty in taking him into service in Russia, if he agreed to the position in terms of maintenance, which was provided there to the chief engineering officials in the hydraulic sector and which amounted to 8,000 rubles a year...

¹⁶ Archivo General de Indias. Habana, 1796-04-27. Estado, 5 B, n. 87.

¹⁷ A. Rumeu de Armas, *Ciencia*, 65–74.

¹⁸ J. Muñoz Bravo, “Betancourt, Godoy y el Soto de Roma,” *Revista de Obras Públicas* 134, no. 3261 (1987): 558–574; O.V. Volosyuk, C. Camarero, “Ispantsy,” 177–178.

¹⁹ AVPRI, f. Relations between Russia and Spain, d. 470, l. 30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, f. Chancellery. 1804, d. 7501.

At that time, this was almost twice the salary that Betancourt received in Spain. But the Russian bureaucratic machine worked slowly: the response to Muravyov-Apostol's dispatch came only in October 1804. Czartoryski wrote: "I wish he could be honored with the same benefits that he has in Spain and which consist of salary and board, amounting to 50,000 livres." Assuming that in Spain, in addition to salary, he was entitled to "some special benefits," the minister noted that he would be allowed to keep them. Czartoryski accounted for the emperor's favor by "the special merits and knowledge of Lieutenant General Betancourt." Moreover, in the draft version of the letter it was indicated that "upon his arrival here, according to the extent of the services that he will be able to render and the results of his work, his salary may be increased." But apparently the Russian authorities decided that there were offered in advance too many privileges to a man they had never met before, and this phrase was deleted from the final version of the letter sent from St. Petersburg to Madrid²¹.

Oddly enough, the slowness of Russian bureaucratic machine contributed to Betancourt's move to Russia. By the autumn of 1804, his relations with Godoy had become much more complicated, and in October 1805 he was removed from managing the work in Soto. By that time, Muravyov-Apostol had already completed his service in Madrid and returned to Russia. Making a sort of conclusion of his diplomatic mission, in one of his last reports to Czartoryski he wrote as follows:

If all goes well, it will be the only good deed I did in Spain. To take a talented man out of nowhere and bring him to my country will always be a source of glory and consolation to me in the midst of the endless disappointments I experienced during my unfortunate stay here²².

He extended the Emperor's invitation to Betancourt. The scientist agreed, but he pointed out a number of conditions, including that he could not leave immediately, since he had to take care of his wife and children, as well as a factory in Avila, which in case it was left without an owner, could fall into decay. In addition, Betancourt demanded guarantees that in Russia he would receive the post of chief engineer for all hydraulic works and that the ports, arsenals, canals, etc. would be under his control²³. At the same time, Betancourt also negotiated with the French. Muravyov wrote:

I know it from reliable sources, not from him [Betancourt], but directly from France, that Bonaparte has already suggested that he take charge of loading and unloading operations in the ports of Toulon and Marseille.²⁴

In the spring of 1806, Betancourt began preparing for his departure. In July he sent his wife and children to Paris. Apparently, it was from her that Muravyov-Apostol's wife, who had also been living in Paris with her children from 1803, learned of the scientist's intentions. She wrote to her husband that Betancourt had already decided to move to Russia²⁵. By the beginning of 1807, Betancourt's position in Spain had become even more complicated. In January, he sent a note to his old acquaintance, the Duke de Infantado about the state of road tolls in Guadalajara²⁶. It was an obvious attempt to find another patron, since the Duke had become one of the confidants of Ferdinand, the heir to the Spanish throne who was eager to remove Godoy from power. In the country there had matured a conspiracy against the favorite led by Infantado, but the conspiracy failed, and it became

²¹ AVPRI, f. Chancellery. 1804, d. 7499, l. 5–6.

²² Ibid., d. 7501, l. 174.

²³ Ibid., 1805, d. 7502, l. 4–5.

²⁴ Ibid., 1804, d. 7501, l. 175.

²⁵ Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (State Archives of the Russian Federation – GARF), f. 1002, op. 1, l. 2.

²⁶ Archivo Histórico de la Nobleza, 1807-01-01. Osuna, c. 1874, leg. 28.

dangerous for Betancourt to stay in the country. This is how he later explained the reasons for his flight from Spain:

Since I observed the feud that was in Spain between the Prince of Asturias (now Ferdinand VII) and Godoy, I assumed that a revolution was about to take place in Spain, and that in such a case it was necessary, in order not to perish with my family, to seek refuge in another state to ensure my safety, and it seemed to me that Russia was the most suitable country²⁷.

In these circumstances, Betancourt was in a hurry to complete negotiations with the government on the transfer of the factory to the state with preliminary compensation of 700 thousand reals, taking into account his modernization of the equipment. In April 1807 he received the full amount and requested passports to leave Spain. He wrote to his brother as follows:

Since at that time every respected person had left the Court, I was granted permission to travel as soon as I asked for it²⁸.

On the way from Madrid to St. Petersburg

In mid-May 1807, Betancourt received a temporary residence permit in France²⁹, where his family already was, but he did not stay there for long: he left his family in Paris and in October went to Russia. According to the information from the Spanish embassy in St. Petersburg, Betancourt was given red carpet treatment. He was invited to a private audience with Alexander I, dined with him and the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna, danced at a ball with the emperor's wife and received as a gift a gold box with diamonds and the emperor's seal, a diamond ring and other honors, "which the Princes of the North usually confer on famous travelers."³⁰ He was invited to visit offices, factories and art institutions, to familiarize himself with the main branches of industry in St. Petersburg and other places. Alexander I suggested that he enter his service and offered him "more than 200 thousand reals and even expenses for the house and travel." However, as noted by S. Lugo-Viña-i-Macena, an official of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Betancourt did not give a final answer to the Russian Emperor, noting "that he had no reason to leave his country, his government and his sovereign who had given him great protection." The last phrase was intended for the Duke of Infantado who was again in favor in case Betancourt decided to return to his homeland. According to Lugo, the Duke was informed of this phrase³¹. Betancourt described his visit to St. Petersburg as follows:

I <...> came here, as they say, to test the waters, and was very well received by the Emperor, who made me <...> very favorable offers if I wanted to enter his service. <...> However, I did not say anything definite and under the pretext of the need to consult with my family I returned to Paris³².

On May 6, 1808, Muravyov-Apostol's wife who was still in Paris with the children informed her husband:

Mr. Betancourt is here, we talk a lot about our country, and he advises me that our sons should study mathematics; he assured me that there are very few experienced Russian engineers³³.

²⁷ "Fundación Canaria para Historia de Ciencia Orotava (FCHCO). 1814," Agustín de Betancourt, accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_02_1790/22/.

²⁸ Ibid., accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_03_1810/41/

²⁹ The temporary departure turned out to be permanent, since Betancourt never returned to Spain.

³⁰ "FCHCO," accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_02_1790/22/

³¹ Ibid., 1809, accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_02_1790/23/

³² Ibid., 1814, accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_03_1810/42/

³³ N.Ya. Eydelman, "K biografii Sergeia Ivanovicha Muravyova-Apostola [The biography of Sergei Ivanovich Muravyov-Apostol]," in *Istoricheskiye zapiski* (Moscow: Nauka Publ., 1975), 260.

In Paris Betancourt learned of the abdication of Charles IV, the arrival of Ferdinand VII in Bayonne and the latter's abdication in favor of Napoleon Bonaparte. Then he made a final decision and later he informed his brother of it:

Not wishing to serve the invading king, I decided to come here [to Russia] with my whole family: my wife, three daughters and son³⁴.

Betancourt left Paris in mid-September 1808. Having learned before his departure that Alexander I was arriving in Erfurt for negotiations with Napoleon, on September 13 he wrote a letter to N.P. Rumyantsev, the head of the Department of Water Communications (from February 1808, he was also the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia) who accompanied the emperor in Erfurt. Betancourt confirmed his agreement to the conditions offered to him, and also informed that he was leaving Breguet as his representative in Paris³⁵. After the meeting in Erfurt, he headed to St. Petersburg and arrived in the northern capital at the end of October 1808.

There began the Russian stage in the life of the “most knowledgeable mechanic in Europe.”

Favorite of Alexander I

When Betancourt arrived in Russia, he was already fifty. He was famous and still vigorous and restless. The talented engineer was favorably received by Emperor Alexander I who gave him a full *carte-blanche*. Lambert who met Betancourt in Madrid told Vigel: “The sovereign trusts him, and in terms of mechanics, he can be considered a European celebrity.”³⁶ Betancourt wrote repeatedly about the favor of Alexander I towards him. On September 15, 1814, he sent a letter to his brother Jose who lived in Orotava in which he emphasized:

The Emperor and the members of the Imperial family received me with honors that I could not claim and that I could not expect <...> Every time I need to talk to him I enter his office without asking anyone's permission: I discuss with him the affairs that he has entrusted to me, and every day confirms my satisfaction with how my service is going. He continued further as follows: He [the Emperor] pays me 25,000 rubles a year as a salary (at that time a ruble was worth 8 reals)³⁷.

This was confirmed by Vigel. He wrote as follows:

The sum assigned to him by the agreement was significant: 24 thousand rubles in banknotes was finally raised to 60 thousand rubles³⁸.

Betancourt explained to his brother:

I can assure you that he treats me not as a sovereign treats a subject, but as a friend³⁹.

In 1819, in a letter to his sister Catalina he wrote as follows:

I can hire any engineers I want. I have over 50 million reals a year at my disposal which can be used to build canals, roads, etc., but I lack people I can trust. All people I propose to the Emperor will be well received, like the four Spanish officers I recommended to him. If your children were good at mathematics and drawing, I would easily provide them with a good career here⁴⁰.

³⁴ “FCHCO. 1814,” accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_03_1810/42/

³⁵ Ibid., 1808, accessed 12.09.2024, <https://fundacionorotava.org/en/portal/databases/digitisations/189/>

³⁶ F.F. Vigel, *Zapiski*, 207.

³⁷ “FCHCO. 1814,” accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_03_1810/42/

³⁸ F.F. Vigel, *Zapiski*, 208.

³⁹ “FCHCO. 1814,” accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_03_1810/42/

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1819, 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_04_1815/6/

In 1809, the Department of Water Communications headed by Rumyantsev expanded the “educational” department and on this basis the Corps of Communication Engineers was created, and within it – the Institute of Communication Engineers. Betancourt was appointed General Inspector of the Institute⁴¹ and with his inherent energy and temperament he got down to work. The Institute was intended to train competent specialists in water and land communications. To this end, Betancourt combined humanitarian, natural science and technical knowledge in the curriculum. He explained his concept of comprehensive education in a letter to his sister Maria de la Carmen inviting her son to study in St. Petersburg.

I considered Latin very important for good education; but French and English will be as useful, and even more useful, and now (if it is not too late) he should learn them, and when he is 15 or 16 years old (and not earlier) he should master a good treatise on mathematics, arithmetic, geometry and trigonometry, as well as the basics of algebra which my son Alfonso has studied this year⁴².

Then he continued:

Some good principles of experimental physics will be of great use, and I suppose that together with other studies they will teach him geography and history⁴³.

This is the kind of education he recommended to Muravyov-Apostol’s wife to give to her sons, and this is the kind of education I.M. Muravyov-Apostol had received.

Muravyov-Apostol’s sons, Sergei and Ippolit, were among the first students at the Institute. Vigel pointed out:

The very first students were young counts and princes, as well as the sons of French, German and English artisans, gardeners, machine operators, tailors and the like⁴⁴.

The first graduates of the Institute took part in the war against Napoleon, about which Betancourt wrote to his brother:

I established an Institute or military college for the training of engineers, and those who graduated from it have already contributed much more to the latest war than was expected of them (I can flatter myself that nowhere is mathematics taught better than in my institute)⁴⁵.

The Institute remained his “favorite brainchild” until the last years of his life. I. Rezimón, a teacher at the Institute of Communication Engineers wrote that

he dealt with the smallest details with everyone who addressed him for advice; he did the work; he expressed his thoughts using phrases and drawings so clearly that nothing prevented complete comprehension. Everyone received the clearest explanations which helped foresee the outcome of the undertakings, and they decided either to carry them out with confidence, or to abandon them without regret⁴⁶.

Having absolute and unconditional trust in the Spanish engineer, Alexander I supported Betancourt’s ideas on the construction of new Petersburg and in 1816 appointed him

⁴¹ “FCHCO. 1809;” accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/allan_legad_xx_01_1796/82/?/

⁴² Ibid., 1821, accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_04_1815/20/

⁴³ Ibid., 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_04_1815/20/

⁴⁴ F.F. Vigel, *Zapiski*, 210.

⁴⁵ “FCHCO. 1814;” accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_03_1810/43/

⁴⁶ I.S. Rezimón, “O sluzhbe i trudakh general-leitenanta de Betankura [The service and works of Lieutenant General de Betancourt],” *Zhurnal putei soobshcheniia*, no. 1 (1826): 54.

head of the Committee for the consideration of building projects and hydraulic works – the only body for developing urban development policy in the capital and Russia as a whole. Under the control of the Committee, major projects were carried out in Petersburg, Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Arkhangelsk, and Kiev. The Committee played its role in the examination and implementation of projects for building in Petersburg unique ensembles and structures unsurpassed in the history of urban development: Palace, Senate, Mikhailovskaya Squares, and the Field of Mars⁴⁷. There was not a single project in the implementation of which Betancourt failed to succeed.

Under my direction there are all the roads and canals of the Empire, the navigation of all the rivers, all buildings of Petersburg, three colleges for the training of engineers, etc. This year I have at my disposal more than 60 million reals to spend on the works⁴⁸.

Alexander I admired his creative ideas. “All his proposals were approved,” wrote Vigel, “all the engineers he offered were awarded.”⁴⁹ Just a year after his arrival in Russia, Betancourt was awarded the rank of lieutenant general, and in 1811 the emperor awarded him the Order of Alexander Nevsky, which was one of the highest awards of the Russian Empire⁵⁰. In 1819, the scientist wrote to Catalina:

I live happily, rejoicing more and more that I decided to serve this magnanimous sovereign⁵¹.

However, a year later the situation changed radically.

Disgrace

Vigel pointed out several reasons for the complication of Betancourt’s position at the court: his independent character and unwillingness to have patrons, as a result of which “the number of Betancourt’s enemies in the highest government circle insulted by him increased every day”⁵²; besides the evolution of the Russian emperor’s political views, Vigel noted another, fairly common reason – envy. In his opinion,

the architects hated Betancourt for Montferrand, the engineers hated him for Rand [another assistant of Betancourt], all the nobles envied his credit; others considered him a foreigner who despised their motherland, and everything was against the good man blinded by success⁵³.

Betancourt failed no project assigned to him, he was never accused of embezzlement, and his creative ideas were accepted with admiration by Alexander I. However, in 1820 there occurred a falling out. A year earlier, Betancourt had joined the Cabinet of Ministers and had become the head of the Main Directorate of Communications. The department was responsible for the condition and construction of roads. In his new high position, he went on a trip around the country: he was in Crimea – in Sevastopol, Kerch and Feodosia, he inspected the ports of the Black Sea, visited the Caucasus and Georgia, where he inspected

⁴⁷ V.Ye. Pavlov, “Augustin Betancourt. Between the past and the future,” *Bulletin of PGUPS*, no. 1-2 (2008): 9.

⁴⁸ “FCHCO. 1820,” accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_04_1815/5/

⁴⁹ F.F. Vigel, *Vospominaniia* [Memories] (Moscow: Universitetskaia tipografiia Katkov i Co. Publ., 1864), 41.

⁵⁰ “FCHCO. 1814,” accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_03_1810/43/

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1819, 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_04_1815/5/

⁵² F.F. Vigel, *Vospominaniia* [Memories] Moscow: Universitetskaia tipografiia Katkov i C°. Publ., 1864, 41.

⁵³ F.F. Vigel, *Zapiski*, 256.

canals and roads, designed gateways and piers. Upon returning to St. Petersburg, he presented a report to the emperor in which he noted the unsatisfactory condition of the roads – both land and water ones⁵⁴. The emperor was offended by the harsh criticism of the state of affairs in his country, but he did not show it.

Many envious people who had previously been afraid to criticize him seeing the emperor's favorable attitude towards him took advantage of the situation. Betancourt was let down by dishonest subordinates; besides, he focused solely on science without delving into financial matters. His enemies wrote a denunciation to the emperor which was supported by A.A. Arakcheyev, the chief of the Imperial Chancellery, a favorite of Alexander I, "whose patronage he [Betancourt] neglected, who was not hostile, but not friendly towards him either."⁵⁵

The seeds fell on prepared soil. According to the adjutant of Alexander I, during the audience that Betancourt requested, the emperor expressed dissatisfaction that Betancourt had failed to cope with the position entrusted to him. Moreover, he stated that he understood Betancourt's difficulties, "spoke to him with regret about the many enemies that he, as a foreigner, had in Russia, and announced that he had come up with a way to give him strong support."⁵⁶ This "support" was German Duke Alexander of Württemberg, the brother of Alexander's mother who had great influence on her son, but Betancourt was not among her favorites. The Emperor presented to Betancourt his absolutely "Jesuitical" decision: the Duke should receive the post of the head of the Main Directorate of Communications which Betancourt had previously occupied. Thus, in Betancourt's life there appeared the Russian "Manuel Godoy, Duke of Alcudia."

The fates of the Duke of Württemberg and the Duke of Alcudia were similar in many ways. Both were poor and rose through the ranks. The Spanish Duke rose to prominence and became rich at the age of 18 thanks to his relationship with the Queen of Spain, Maria Luisa. After the marriage of cesarevitch Paul to his sister, the German Duke received the rank of brigadier in the Russian army from Catherine II, and in 1800 he was accepted into Russian service with the rank of lieutenant general. When in 1816 his niece Catherine, the younger sister of Alexander I married King William I, the Russian imperial family became even closer to the Württembergs.

Württemberg showed demonstrative disrespect for his predecessor: he refused to meet with Betancourt, took all the documents from his office in his absence, and removed the Institute from the Yusupov Palace, as well as Betancourt and his family that lived there. Betancourt was forced to rent an apartment not far from the new building of the Institute. In response to his complaint, the Emperor stated that he could free Betancourt from dependence on Württemberg by removing him from the management of both the Corps of Engineers and the Institute. He had only the position of the head of the Committee for the consideration of building projects, leading the construction of St. Isaac's Cathedral and the Nizhny Novgorod Fair⁵⁷. It was disgrace. But the situation was fundamentally different from the events of 16 years earlier in Spain. Betancourt could not leave Russia: he was no longer young enough to travel long distances, and he could not abandon his family and his unfinished brainchildren in Russia. Besides, in 1822 there was no "Muravyov-Apostol" at the St. Petersburg court who could intercede for him with the monarch of another country. In February 1824, Betancourt resigned from all his positions, and the emperor accepted his

⁵⁴ "FCHCO. 1820," accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_rappo_fr_01_1820/1/

⁵⁵ F.F. Vigel, *Vospominaniia*, 41.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

resignation. Less than six months later, on July 14/26 “the most knowledgeable mechanic in Europe” died. At the end of his life, Betancourt wrote as follows:

I have no regrets about any step I have taken in my life to ensure the well-being of my family without violating what honor and patriotism dictate⁵⁸.

However, the “disgrace” followed him even after his death. Although the Duke of Württemberg gathered the employees of the Institute for a memorial service, and the Emperor issued a decree preserving financial support for Betancourt’s wife and children, some of his colleagues tried to take advantage of his scientific achievements and erase the memory of the outstanding engineer and inventor. One of them was French architect Montferrand⁵⁹. In a letter to Alphons de Betancourt in 1852, he admitted:

It is to Mr. de Betancourt, your honorable father, that Russia will be indebted for this temple. I consider myself just a mason, an executor of his great ideas⁶⁰.

However, both at the opening of the Alexander Column in 1834 and at the grand opening of St. Isaac’s Cathedral in 1858, the French architect “forgot” about Betancourt.

This was confirmed by Vigel who was constantly near Betancourt and was present when many urban planning decisions emerged and were discussed by Betancourt and his colleagues. He unconditionally recognized his engineering talent. Recalling the construction of St. Isaac's Cathedral, Vigel wrote as follows:

General Betancourt was appointed a member of this commission in terms of art, that is, he was a real builder; but it is Montferrand, an architect by chance who was honored as the builder⁶¹.

Emphasizing the genius of Betancourt’s engineering solution, which Montferrand used when constructing the Alexander Column on Palace Square in St. Petersburg, Vigel figuratively noted:

Betancourt also needed a mechanical genius to lift such a weight and put it in front of the building like a stick⁶².

However, he immediately pointed out the unseemly role of the French architect:

The machines he invented were of great help to Montferrand, and after his death they became his inheritance⁶³.

This was written almost forty years after Betancourt’s death.

Conclusion

The structures of Agustin de Betancourt retain their engineering and architectural value to this day. Muravyov-Apostol’s assessment of his work as “the most knowledgeable mechanic in Europe” was fully confirmed by Russian contemporaries and recognized by Emperor Alexander I who entrusted him with the formation of the urban landscape of the Russian capital. The disgrace that the Spanish architect suffered in the last years of his life

⁵⁸ “FCHCO. 1820,” accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/betan_corre_es_04_1815/8.

⁵⁹ S.M. Shumilkin, *Nizhegorodskaja iarmarka* [The Nizhny Novgorod Fair] (Nizhny Novgorod: Kvarts Publ., 2014).

⁶⁰ “FCHCO. 1852,” accessed 12.09.2024, https://fundacionorotava.org/pynakes/lise/allan_legad_xx_01_1796/120/

⁶¹ F.F. Vigel, *Zapiski*, 254.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 255.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

largely influenced the fact that his name and contribution to the formation of the national cultural heritage of Spain and Russia were “forgotten” in our country for many years. On the building of the Moscow Manezh there still hangs a memorial plaque only with the name of architect O. Bove; in St. Petersburg the issue of setting a memorial plaque on the house where Betancourt lived has not been resolved. Thus, despite the fact that Russia and Spain have long-standing cultural ties, much has to be done in terms of cooperation in preserving and popularizing the cultural heritage of the two countries.

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