

The Abdication of Emperor Charles V (1555/56)

Abstract

Charles had, with some reluctance, handed over the rule of the Austrian lands to his brother, Ferdinand, in 1522, and had also appointed him his vicar in the Empire. Ferdinand was elected Roman King in 1531. Yet as late as 1548, Charles was still toying with the idea of leaving his many and diverse realms intact and bequeathing them to his only direct heir, Prince Philip. By 1555, however, the situation had changed. Wracked by gout, forced to recognize the failure of his religious policy in the Empire, and pressed by his family to make a settlement, Charles decided to abdicate. The first document (A) is an excerpt from the speech Charles gave to the notables of the Netherlands on October 25, 1555. In it, he announced his abdication of the rule over the Low Countries in favor of his son and heir, Prince Philip, the future King Philip II of Spain. The second document (B) defines the Imperial succession. It contains Charles' instructions for his commissioners, Prince William of Orange-Nassau and Imperial Vice-Chancellor Georg Seld, who were sent to negotiate with King Ferdinand and the Imperial electors about the formal transfer of the Imperial title and administration to Ferdinand.

Source

A. Charles Announces his Abdication before the Notables of the Netherlands (Excerpt)

Brussels, October 25, 1555

Some of you will remember that on the 5th of January of this year, exactly forty years had passed since the day when, in this same hall, at the age of fifteen, I received the rule over the Belgian provinces from my paternal grandfather, Emperor Maximilian. Soon thereafter, the death of my maternal grandfather, King Ferdinand the Catholic, brought to me the rule over an inheritance that my mother was too ill to administer.[1] Thus, at the age of seventeen, I sailed over the sea to take possession of the Kingdom of Spain. When I was nineteen, upon the emperor's death, I undertook to be a candidate for the Imperial crown, not to increase my possessions but rather to engage myself more vigorously in working for the welfare of Germany and my other provinces, namely the Belgian provinces, and in the hopes of thereby bringing peace among the Christian peoples and uniting their fighting forces for the defense of the Catholic faith against the Ottomans.

It was partly the German heresy and partly the envoy of rival powers that prevented me from fully achieving the goal of my efforts. With God's help, I have nonetheless never ceased resisting my foes or striving to fulfill my mission. The campaigns I undertook, some to begin wars, some to make peace, took me nine times to Germany, six times to Spain, seven times to Italy, four times to France, twice to England, and twice to Africa in a total of four great journeys, not to mention the less important visits I paid over the years to my individual realms. I have crossed the Mediterranean Sea eight times and sailed the Atlantic Ocean twice, not to speak of the journey I made from Spain to the Netherlands for the very serious reasons about which you know. My frequent absence from these provinces forced me to hand their administration over to my sister, Mary, who is present today. The States-General know as well as I do how faithfully she has performed her duties.[2] Although involved in many wars, I have never gone happily to battle, and as I take leave of you, nothing is more painful than my inability to leave you in a firm, secure state of peace. Already before my last campaign in Germany, my pitiful state of health prompted me to consider the idea of divesting myself of the burdens of state, but the troubles which then beset Christendom forced me to give up this plan in the hopes that peace could be restored.[3] Because I felt stronger then than I do now, I held it for my duty to sacrifice my remaining strength and my

life for my peoples' welfare. I had almost reached my goal, when the attack by the French king and some German princes called me once more to arms.^[4] Against my enemies I accomplished what I could, but success in war lies in the hands of God, Who gives victory or takes it away, as He pleases. We thank Divine Providence that We have experienced no very great mutation of things bearing permanent consequences. On the contrary, many battles have been won that Our children can celebrate.

As I withdraw, I beg you to be loyal to your princes and to maintain a firm understanding among yourselves. Above all, avoid those new sects that plague our neighboring lands, and when heresy seeps over your boundaries, do not delay in wiping it out, or it will go badly for you. I must for my part confess that I have often misled myself, either from youthful inexperience, from the pride of mature years, or from some other weakness of human nature. I nonetheless declare to you that I never knowingly or willingly acted unjustly or with unjust force, nor did I ever command or empower another to do so. If actions of this kind are nevertheless justly laid to my account, I formally assure you now that I did them unknowingly and against my own intention. I therefore beg those present today, whom I have offended in this respect, together with those who are absent, to forgive me. [...]

[To Prince Philip, his Son and Heir.] If you were to have come into possession of these provinces through my death, such a wonderful inheritance would well have secured me a just claim on your gratitude. Now, however, as I give them to you by my own will to be yours before the moment when my time is over, I expect that you will fully repay the debt you owe me by means of the love and care you devote to your people. Other kings account themselves happy when, at the hour of death, they can set their crowns on their children's heads, but I wished to experience this joy while yet alive, and to see you rule. What I am doing will hardly be imitated in future, as it has rarely been done in the past, but I will be praised for it, if you justify my trust by ruling with the wisdom you have heretofore displayed, and if you continue to be a zealous defender of the Catholic faith, of the law, and of justice, which are the bulwarks of rulership. May you, too, be granted a son, to whom you can transfer your authority as I give mine over to you.

B. Charles Transfers the Imperial Title to King Ferdinand

August 3, 1556

[...] First, the envoys to His Roman Royal Majesty shall advise and urge him to accept the complete administration of the Empire and the Imperial dignity, title, and majesty, and relieve His Imperial Majesty of all these burdens.

If His Royal Majesty is willing, the envoys are instructed to visit each of the Empire's electors and inform them of the following points.

First, that His Imperial Majesty most graciously thanks them for electing him, above all other monarchs and princes, to this Imperial dignity and lordship. Further, that His Majesty can say with certainty from his own knowledge that, since the inception of His Imperial rule, they have faithfully sought the interest, honor, welfare, and health of the Holy Roman Empire.

[Charles continues to thank the electors for their support, then details his poor health, and announces his desire to give up his rule over the Empire, and he recommends Ferdinand to them as his already elected successor. If they accept this act, the electors are to be relieved of their oaths to Charles.]

If, however, His Royal Majesty cannot be persuaded to accept the Roman Imperial title, dignity, and administration, the envoys are empowered and ordered to negotiate with him so that he accepts the Imperial dignity and administration, leaving the title alone to His Imperial Majesty. If he agrees, the envoys shall secure the electors' agreement, as stipulated above.

If, however, His Royal Majesty will not accept this [solution], the envoys have a third instruction, namely,

that His Royal Majesty shall have the administration of the Holy Empire, as is proper for the Roman King in His [Imperial] Majesty's absence. And they shall admonish the electors and other Imperial Estates to be properly obedient.

For these three distinct proposals, the envoys have three different powers and instructions, to be brought forward serially, so that the second and third are to be proposed only if the first is clearly hopeless.

NOTES

[1] King Ferdinand of Aragon and his and Charles' mother, Juana—trans.

[2] The States-General were the united parliaments (estates) of the seventeen provinces of the Burgundian-Habsburg Netherlands—trans.

[3] The Schmalkaldic War of 1546–47 against the Protestant League of Schmalkalden—trans.

[4] The campaign of some Protestant princes, carried out with French aid in 1552, destroyed the emperor's settlement of 1548 and led to the Treaty of Passau of 1552 and the Religious Peace in 1555—trans.

Source: Alfred Kohler, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte Karls V.* Darmstadt: WBG, 1990, pp. 466-68, 480–82.

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