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978-0-521-09045-2 - Diplomacy and Strategy of Survival: British Policy and Franco's Spain, 1940-41

Denis Smyth

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Introduction

Countless and inestimable are the chances of war. Those who read the story, and still more those who share the dangers, of a campaign feel that every incident is surrounded with a host of possibilities, any one of which, had it become real, would have changed the whole course of events.¹

Britain's grand strategists indulged understandably in a form of 'whistling in the dark' during the period of their country's desperate struggle for survival in 1940–1. The three-pronged strategy which they elaborated to effect the destruction of Nazi Germany by way of bombs, blockade and 'bolshevism', may have derived more from their own psychological necessity to conceive some path to victory than from any objective assessment of their real military, economic and political possibilities in the fight with the Axis. Certainly, British strategic thought had come to stress, well before the outbreak of war in 1939, the advantages of enervating aggressive German power by such indirect means, as against the frightful cost of direct military confrontation with the Wehrmacht. The lethargic Anglo-French search for oblique avenues of assault against Germany during the 'Phoney War' exemplifies this aversion to engaging in frontal combat.² However, the resolution with which British strategists formulated, after the collapse of France, a grandiose plan for the reduction of German power by economic strangulation, aerial bombardment and popular subversion inside the Nazi-occupied countries, suggests that they were making a virtue of necessity. For, they founded their scheme exclusively on those strategic devices apparently still available after the defeat of their continental ally and the expulsion of British troops from the European mainland.³ Yet the elimination of the French Army inevitably undermined the effectiveness of any British offensive design. Without the defensive buffer of the French force, there was nothing to contain and confine Germany's striking power indefinitely while the programme of attrition by air, sea and internal disruption steadily sapped its strength. Britain's grand strategists in 1940–1 were motivated by faith rather than hope. Belief in

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victory, somehow, someway, was an expression of their will to survive.

Winston Churchill was, during the Second World War, as he had been during the first, a protagonist of various versions of the indirect attack on Germany. Nonetheless, in the period 1940–1, although formally subscribing to the strategy proposed by his Chiefs of Staff, he was perhaps less in need of any psychological solace which it provided than his colleagues.⁴ To him, resistance was its own justification. He found it enough to fight on and to wait for something to turn up, to turn the tide eventually. As he acknowledged to a conference of Commanders-in-Chief in London, on 31 October 1940:

No more than anyone else did he see clearly how the war was going to be won . . . for four years in 1914–18 nobody could foretell the final collapse of Germany, which came so unexpectedly at the end, and in an unexpected way. All we could do for the present, as during the Great War, was to get on with it and see what happened – our chief weapons at the moment being the blockade and air bombardment.⁵

No matter how British military planners might envisage the long-term prospects of their cause, the British battle, throughout the eighteen months from the fall of France until the entry of the United States into the war, was to endure. If the dominant theme in German strategy in 1940–1 was the preparation and launching of a massive drive for *Lebensraum* in Eastern Europe, Britain was engaged, at the same time, in a sustained fight for breathing-space.

It was precisely in the context of this struggle for survival that Franco's Spain assumed great importance for Britain's grand strategists. For Spain's strategic location astride maritime, imperial and inter-continental lines of communication made its attitude towards the war crucial for the British fight to survive. Even if the fortress of Gibraltar could have withstood attack longer than the few days within which the Germans reckoned they could conquer it, the vital naval, and valuable air bases on the Rock would have been rendered unusable by a few hours' air and artillery bombardment.⁶ The loss of control over the Strait of Gibraltar would clearly have an immediate impact upon the British position in the Mediterranean, 'the pivot of their world Empire', to use the German Admiral Raeder's phrase.⁷ Direct communications with Egypt and the Suez Canal would be throttled and, perhaps, severed completely. British pressure on the weaker Axis partner, Italy, would be relieved and Britain's Eastern Mediterranean friend, Turkey, cowed. As Churchill wrote, 'Spain held the key to all British enterprises in the Mediterranean'.⁸

British dependence upon overseas sources of food and raw

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materials only accentuated the critical character of Spain's international stance for a Britain at war. Italian entry into the war had blocked easy access to Middle East oil and the resources of the British and Dutch Asian Empires by making the passage via the Suez Canal route too risky, but even the 'long haul' round the Cape would be jeopardised by the expulsion of the British Navy from Gibraltar. For, with British war-ships driven north to home bases and south to Freetown, and German surface and submarine craft operating from Spanish – and probably Portuguese – ports, Britain's ability to conduct maritime traffic in the central and south Atlantic would be severely, maybe even fatally, damaged. The operational radius offered to the German Navy by Spain's strategic situation is indicated by the fact that, even before the fall of France, German submarines, clandestinely refuelled in Spanish harbours, were able to operate off the north Brazilian coast.⁹ The range of German air attack and reconnaissance on British shipping would also be extended by the use of Spanish airfields. Recognising these dangers, and that Britain and the Empire depended for their survival on the security of the sea-lanes, Basil Liddell Hart, as early as 1938, advised the then War Minister, Hore-Belisha, that in wartime 'a friendly Spain is desirable, a neutral Spain is vital'.¹⁰

After the French defeat, Spain's position as Europe's gateway to Africa also assumed great significance. As British hopes and German fears came to focus on the possibility of renewed French resistance based on their North African Empire, the Spanish artery to Morocco became the common factor in their counter-calculations. Thus, the British Joint Planning Staff engaged, in February 1941, upon assessing the feasibility of assisting a possible revival of French belligerency under Weygand in French North Africa, concluded, thus:

The greatest threat to our interests would arise from a German occupation of Spain and Spanish Morocco, as this would reduce our control in the Western Mediterranean and gravely jeopardise our sea communications with French North African ports. It would also menace General Weygand's supply lines through Casablanca and so threaten his whole position in North Africa.¹¹

Once over the Spanish bridgeway, of course, the way would be open for German forces to West Africa and the port of Dakar, affording still greater opportunities for domination of the Atlantic sea-lanes, and even of threatening America. French North Africa, geographically in Spain's shadow, was also the most convenient point of entry for United States' forces into the Eurafrikan war. Both Churchill and the British Ambassador in Spain, 1940–4, Sir Samuel Hoare, grasped the

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importance of the Hispano–North African region for future American operations long before Operation ‘Torch’ of November 1942.¹²

Spain’s reaction to the war could well determine, too, the ultimate accessibility of the vast economic resources of the Mediterranean and African regions, to which it could open or bar the way. All in all, as Churchill again wrote, ‘Spain had much to give and even more to take away.’¹³

The purpose of the following chapters is to define the course, crises and consequences of the process by which a British policy, to meet the dangers emanating from Spain, was formulated and sustained during the period from June 1940 until December 1941. In 1940, that policy was largely the function of a policy-making partnership between two ex-members of the discredited Chamberlain Cabinet, Sir Samuel Hoare and Lord Halifax. For, if Hoare found himself as British Ambassador ‘on Special Mission’ in Madrid, at the beginning of June 1940, Halifax remained Foreign Secretary until late in December of that year. Hoare, in fact, articulated a policy for Britain towards Spain which, with Halifax’s support, in large part determined the nature of its diplomacy and strategy towards the latter in 1940, and even into 1941. This policy success for two of the ‘Old Gang’ was all the more remarkable in that that policy could be labelled by both contemporary critics and at least one modern historian, as ‘in effect, appeasement once more’.¹⁴

Based on the assessment, perhaps the assumption, that Franco wished to remain outside the European conflict, and might be weaned away from the Axis orbit, a policy emerged designed to satisfy Spanish economic needs, and demonstrate British sympathy and, or support for Spain’s territorial ambitions. It was hoped that this double-barrelled policy would offset both the intimidating proximity of German forces on the Pyrenean frontier, and the influence exercised by the apparently invincible German military machine over Spanish minds. This scheme was stunted less by domestic British opposition than by Spanish recalcitrance, stemming from their fear of the Germans. The gradually disclosed unwillingness of the United States Government to co-operate in furnishing substantial economic aid and credits to Spain, also greatly reduced the scope of economic help with which Britain could tempt the Spaniards. Despite Hoare’s repeated efforts, British economic policy towards Spain tended to impress negatively, rather than positively: Britain’s power to starve Spain through its naval blockade of Nazi-dominated Europe, was more evident than any effort to feed the hungry Spaniards.

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It was in its negative aspect, indeed, that the Hoare–Halifax policy-line on Spain would prove most significant. This was not only a consequence of the fact that Hoare had to spend so much time defending his policy against its critics and opponents. This tendency of the negative, restraining, rather than the positive, prescriptive side of Hoare's policy to predominate, was probably inherent in Britain's perilous strategic position in 1940–1. For although Britain's rulers were naturally anxious not to multiply the enemies or difficulties which they faced in their desperate circumstances, one of their most urgent concerns was to discern new sources of potential danger, and to forestall or anticipate them. The way the Germans had managed to seize the initiative throughout the earlier phase of the war only reinforced the British determination not to be wrong-footed yet again. 'Must we always wait until a disaster has occurred?', Churchill asked his Foreign Secretary, in July 1940.¹⁵ Britain could no longer afford to respond to German surprises after the event. Churchill, as is explained in chapter two, was worried at that time about British vulnerability at Gibraltar, so open to attack from Spain. Spain, indeed, was to become throughout the remainder of 1940 and 1941 a constant object of British fears and anxieties. It could present so many new threats by its active enmity, or merely by acquiescing in a German move through its territory. Thus it was that the Prime Minister, despite his earnest desire that Spain should remain at peace – 'I want Spain to keep neutral as long as possible', he told Hugh Dalton in March 1941 – came to contemplate initiating military action against Spain on several occasions in 1940–1.¹⁶ The evidence at certain times seemed to suggest to him and, or to others that Franco had definitely gone over to the Axis: so why not anticipate the inevitable loss of Gibraltar by striking first and seizing alternative bases, say in Spanish Morocco or the Portuguese and Spanish Atlantic Islands?

In the event, the Prime Minister's particular fears proved unfounded, and he was only too happy to revert to his preferred policy of peace with Spain. Had he acted on his initial impulses, however, it would have been too late and Britain would have precipitated Spanish belligerency, the very contingency which British policy-makers sought to avoid. It was exactly at this point that the moderating influence of Halifax or Hoare, and their Spanish policy, proved decisive. For by personal intervention and counter-interpretation they were able to assuage Churchill's apprehensions and alarm and to defuse these dangerous crises. Ironically, Hoare did not know just how crucial was his role in preventing a British attack on Spain as he

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was not privy to the grand strategic deliberations at the critical moments. However, resolve these crises Hoare and Halifax did, in more ways than one. Because their policy-line on Spain seemed to have achieved some success, with the passage of time and without any change in Spanish non-belligerency, Churchill was inclined to listen to them in an emergency, even when his strategic instinct sensed danger. So the actual momentum of the Hoare–Halifax Spanish policy created an atmosphere of wariness and reflection for policy-making on Spain, even at times of crisis. It was in this context of caution that the personal interventions of Halifax or Hoare served to inhibit any dramatic reversal in policy. The very durability of the Hoare–Halifax line on Spain was also the major factor in converting a leading sceptic, Anthony Eden, Halifax's successor as foreign Secretary in late 1940, into a grudging supporter of the policy.

The most salient feature of the following chapters will be an exposition of the way in which the positive aspects of the policy advocated by Hoare, large-scale economic aid and some expression of support for Spanish territorial ambitions, tended to wither away for several reasons, leaving the negative facet of the policy to exercise a vital check on those over-anxious to get their retaliation in first, as it were. If Britain could not draw Spain away from the Axis, it must, at least, abstain from such actions as a military assault or a total economic blockade, which were bound to provoke Spanish belligerency. Although Hoare tenaciously persisted in trying to mount a coherent and elaborate British effort to tempt Spain into the British orbit throughout 1940–1, Spanish sensitivity to German wrath and American suspicion were too great. Nevertheless, in his efforts to prevent an intolerable economic blockade of Spain and to calm his Government's nerves in times of peril, he was outstandingly successful – much more so than even he realised. In doing so, he was helped sometimes by luck with apparently favourable Spanish developments, and always by the Prime Minister's surprising willingness to listen, and to let himself be dissuaded from aggressive action.

For if Churchill could impress as being 'a wild tactician, certainly; frequently a crackpot strategist', what is striking about his role in the successive crises in Anglo–Spanish relations during 1940–1, is the capacity which he revealed for reflection and reappraisal.¹⁷ So, in spite of his reputation for letting enthusiasm outweigh calculation when the prospect of a fight loomed, the Prime Minister manifested, where Spain was concerned, an ability to reassess and reverse projected courses of action. Churchill's open-mindedness became even more decisive in maintaining an attitude of forbearance towards

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Spain in the course of 1941. Then, the removal of Halifax from the Foreign Office, and the growing suspicion amongst Britain's grand strategists that the Spaniards were likely to be drawn into the Axis war effort, meant the virtual elimination of influential voices consistently advocating caution concerning Spanish affairs in the inner circles of the British Government. Hoare's pleas from Madrid for circumspection would have been futile without a receptive listener at 'the centre of the web' in London.

The essence of the subsequent chapters will be an analysis of the whole of the foregoing process, highlighting the major crises in Anglo-Spanish relations during the period 1940-1.

However, what is attempted is not simply a contextualisation of crisis diplomacy. An effort will be made to display the full significance and complexity of Anglo-Spanish relations in 1940-1. It is possible, from a juxtaposition of American, British, German, Portuguese and Spanish sources, to sketch some dimensions of the domestic, economic and political scenes in Spain and to comment on certain aspects of Spanish policy. Thus, it will be observed that Franco, though treading very warily, did entertain the idea of entering the war in the latter half of 1940. A seasoned survivor, Franco recognised that the feeble Spanish economy and his own delicate political position would not withstand the shock of a sustained war effort. If he had to avoid getting embroiled in a long war, however, Franco was equally concerned not to let Hitler win without his intervention. That might be just as dangerous to his survival in power as premature entry into the war. It certainly would prevent the Spanish leader from using the instrument of German victory to realise his designs on French North Africa by making a token and tardy contribution to it. It will be explained in the second and fifth chapters how Franco evinced a definite interest in belligerency on the side of the Axis powers in June and again in September 1940, when he considered them to be on the threshold of triumph. British stamina and the unsympathetic German response to these initiatives did not, at first, deter Franco from the attempt to tie his country to Germany and Italy in a diplomatic association which would bring Spain into the war, at a future moment of his own choice, in return for the Axis-aided acquisition of those North African territories – principally Morocco and the Oran region of Algeria – which he coveted. However, Hitler's aversion to jeopardising the uncertain Vichy French hold on their North African Empire by promising parts of it to a Spanish Government, which he felt was sure to divulge such a commitment and thus provoke a movement towards de Gaulle in

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that area, was evident by November 1940. The German refusal to satisfy him on this essential point alienated Franco from contemplating any but the most reluctant and belated war effort. From the early winter of 1940 onwards, Spanish non-belligerency was effectively stabilised in the absence of any apparently irreparable injury to the British cause, such as the loss of Suez. This new stability in Spain's international position was by no means evident to the watchful British. Indeed, the irony is that all their real frights about Spanish policy post-date the *démarche* by Franco in the autumn of 1940.

However, that British statesmen and grand strategists occasionally misread the signs of Spain's international intentions during 1940–1, is not surprising. For Franco's Spain presented them with diplomatic and strategic problems of a character without precedent in Anglo-Spanish relations in modern times. In order to emphasise the novel nature of the difficulties posed by Francoist Spain to British policy-makers, from June 1940 to December 1941, an analysis is made in chapter one of the main purposes and priorities shaping Britain's policy towards the Spanish Civil War, 1936–9. That policy was founded on what seemed to be a secure set of expectations concerning Spain's international position. For the facts of Spain's geopolitical situation, with the country encircled by British sea, and French land, power appeared to condemn it to the position, however reluctantly adopted by the Francoist state, of Anglo-French satellite. Spain's economic dependence on London and Paris was also reaffirmed by the destructive impact of a three-year-long civil war. However, the process of post-civil war reconciliation between Britain and Franco's Spain which, in fulfilment of London's confident expectations, was well under way by the spring of 1940, was rudely interrupted by Germany's western offensive. France's capitulation to its German conquerors, in June 1940, seemed to remove the basis for Anglo-Spanish *rapprochement*. Released from Anglo-French confinement, the Franco regime was at liberty to consort with the Nazi forces as they reached the Pyrenees. British policy-makers could no longer assume that Franco would meekly accept the role of diplomatic client of the democracies. Diplomatic ingenuity and strategic improvisation were now employed in a desperate bid to retain Britain's influence in a country where, previously, the reality of Anglo-French power had sufficed to ensure, almost automatically, the primacy of their interests.

With Britain engaged in a life-and-death struggle against Hitler's Germany, and the Franco regime confronted with a crucial choice for external war or peace as the means of internal political consolidation,

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both London and Madrid found that their foreign policies inevitably concentrated on the most basic issue in international relations: survival or extinction. The long-term significance of the policies pursued by Britain and Franco's Spain, in 1940–1, for the subsequent survival of their respective political systems and national sovereignties is assessed in the conclusion.

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Britain and the birth of Franco's Spain, 1936–39

On 19 June 1940, a Labour member of Britain's new wartime coalition government, Hugh Dalton, conferred with Rear-Admiral T. S. V. Phillips, Vice-Chief of Naval Staff. During the course of their conversation concerning Britain's blockade of Nazi-dominated mainland Europe, the admiral was moved to denounce the political blunders which had placed his country in such mortal danger by successively antagonising Germany, Japan, Italy and Spain. Phillips was particularly critical of British policy towards the recent Spanish Civil War:

To have Spain as an enemy would jeopardise the whole of our control both of the western Mediterranean and the Atlantic sea routes. It is unthinkable that we should have been brought to such a point. We backed the Bolsheviks in Spain in 1936 and '37 against the only man who, in modern times, has been able to make Spain strong.¹

The admiral was mistaken in both assertion and assumption. Far from favouring the Republican camp in 1936–7, or afterwards, the British Government were almost all sympathetic towards the Spanish Nationalist cause.² However, unsure as to the ultimate victor in the contest, and cautious lest precipitate action should prejudice British interests on its termination, His Majesty's ministers refrained from any spectacular support for Franco. They sought security in non-intervention, thereby hoping to ensure that whichever side won it 'should not enter upon its inheritance with any serious grudge' against Britain.³

By its very inaction, however, the British Government rendered vital services to the Nationalist civil war effort.⁴ Britain's adherence to the international Non-Intervention Agreement of August 1936 relieved its Government of the need to confess openly its unwillingness to allow Republican Spain to purchase war *matériel* within its jurisdiction.⁵ The signatories of the Non-Intervention Agreement