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Introduction

With the voyages of discovery and the establishment of global empires in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Iberian powers – Spain and Portugal – could properly be referred to as great powers. But the gradual decline of Spain and more rapid decline of Portugal in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries relegated them to the ranks of the lesser European powers despite the persistence of their respective empires. Following the Peninsular War of the early nineteenth century, both powers appeared only intermittently on the radar of the great powers – the Spanish revolt of 1821–1823, the Portuguese succession crises of the 1820s and 1830s, the Carlist Wars of the 1830s, the Spanish Marriages of 1847–1848, the Spanish succession in 1870 which provided the pretext for the Franco-Prussian War, the Spanish–American War of 1898, the Moroccan Crises of 1905–1906 and 1911 and the Anglo-German machinations with regard to the Portuguese colonies of 1898–1899 and 1911–1914. During the First World War Spain remained neutral though leaning slightly towards the Central Powers, while Portugal belatedly joined the Allies in 1916 contributing 55,000 troops, of whom there were eventually 10,000 casualties.¹ As far as the Iberian Peninsula was concerned the 1920s scarcely registered a blip on the radar of the great powers regardless of the inception of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship in monarchist Spain in 1923, which lasted until 1930, or the overthrow of the Portuguese Parliamentary Republic and its replacement by a military dictatorship in 1926.

The Second Spanish Republic, which replaced the Alfonsoist Monarchy in April 1931 while the world was in the throes of the Great Depression, began to attract greater attention from the great powers for economic and commercial reasons but also in connection with international issues, such as disarmament, Mediterranean security and in 1935 the Ethiopian crisis. Above all, the internal politics of Spanish society, with its ideological polarisation between the forces of the Left and Right at a time when Europe itself was becoming more polarised ideologically,

aroused growing interest and concern in the chancelleries of the European great powers and the United States. The Spanish Left was divided between anarchists (*Federación Anarquista Ibérica* – FAI) and their anarcho-syndicalist labour union the CNT (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*), socialists (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español* – PSOE) and their labour union the UGT (*Unión General de Trabajadores*), communists (*Partido Comunista de España* – PCE), the Left Republicans (*Izquierda Republicana*) and other smaller parties.² The Spanish Right was composed of monarchist parties, the Alfonsist *Renovación Española* and the Carlist *Comunión Tradicionalista*, the nationwide mass Catholic party CEDA (*Confederación de Derechas Autónomas* – Spanish Confederation of Right Wing Groups), the much smaller Spanish Fascist party, the *Falange Española*, the Radical Republican Party (*Partido Republicano Radical*) and the Spanish military and church hierarchies. As Helen Graham has emphasised, it was the polarisation of these social and political forces and the inability of the Left Republicans and the PSOE to elaborate a strategy of mass mobilisation to counteract the mass mobilisation of conservative opinion in Spain which made the military rebellion of 18 July 1936 viable.³ The great powers had virtually no part to play in the Generals' decision to issue a *pronunciamiento* to overthrow the democratic Republic even though rumours of a coup had been circulating in Europe's capitals and also Washington since at least March 1936.

Had the attempted *coup d'état* succeeded it is almost certain that the great powers, with the exception of Soviet Russia, would probably have granted at least *de facto* recognition to the new military regime but it failed and instead provoked a civil war which was to last 33 months and cost the lives eventually of well over half a million Spaniards, including large numbers of Republican prisoners executed after the civil war, and the deaths of tens of thousands of foreign combatants.⁴ It also brought the Iberian Peninsula to the centre stage of international politics for a time until at least the middle of 1938. Foreign influence on the outcome of the civil war was immense.

The intervention of Germany and Italy on the side of the Spanish rebels, who were increasingly referred to in diplomatic circles as the Nationalists, was extremely important from virtually the beginning of the civil war. Within days of the failed coup, the Spanish Army of North Africa consisting of 17,000 Moorish

Regulars, 17,000 Spanish conscripts and about 5000 soldiers of the Spanish Foreign Legion under the command of General Francisco Franco who would become the supreme leader of the Nationalist forces, was trapped by the Spanish Navy which had remained under Republican control as a result of treasonous officers being overwhelmed by their crews. As a result, German and Italian transport planes were used to ferry the African Army to the mainland during the last days of July and throughout August and September either directly or by escorting rebel troop ships. German and Italian aircraft also replenished the small rebel air force which helped drive the Republican Navy from the Straits of Gibraltar and provided air cover and support for the Nationalist drive north towards Madrid. German ships patrolling the Moroccan coastline were also used to harass the Republican Navy while Italian aircraft and ships were used to help the Nationalists seize Majorca where an Italian air base was established.⁵ The arrival of the *Corpo di Truppe Voluntarie* (CTV) in Spain in early 1937 considerably reinforced the Nationalist forces contributing immediately to the capture of Málaga and while the Italian participation in the Battle of Guadalajara in March 1937 has been regarded as a disaster, Italian forces still occupied half the terrain they had initially seized. Although the Italian armies were held in reserve during the entire Bilbao offensive in April, May and June 1937 German and Italian aircraft were used to provide close air support to General Emilio Mola's attack on the Basque country. German bombers had also practised terror bombing on the civilian population of the small market town of Guernica in late April. In July 1937 German and Italian air personnel helped the Nationalists to repel the Republican Brunete offensive while in August the CTV contributed to the capture of Santander which was followed in September and October by the subjugation of the Asturias region.

The conquest of the Basque Country, Santander and Asturias gave Franco a decisive military and industrial advantage over his Republican enemies and German and Italian air support had by now delivered clear air superiority to the Nationalists which they never relinquished for the remainder of the war. Within a few more months and the end of the Aragón winter offensive of December 1937–February 1938 which had centred on Teruel, the Nationalists had achieved a 20 per cent advantage in terms of men and, thanks

to German and Italian material assistance, an overwhelming one in terms of aircraft, artillery and other equipment.⁶ The capture of Teruel was followed during March, April and May 1938 by a further massive offensive through Aragón aimed at cutting off Catalonia from Valencia and the central Republican zone. The CTV took part in this offensive which was supported by almost 1000 Italian and German aircraft and 200 tanks and when the offensive started to flag in June it was revived by further Italian aid, including 6000 new troops and large numbers of aircraft. When the Republican counter-offensive on the Ebro front created a stalemate between the two armies in late summer and autumn it was eventually broken with the help of further substantial arms deliveries from Germany which along with further Italian reinforcements contributed to the final offensive against Catalonia of December 1938–January 1939.

The Nationalist forces also received substantial assistance from the German and Italian Navies. They provided protection for the merchant vessels transporting illicit arms to the Iberian Peninsula and provided intelligence on Republican and Soviet maritime traffic. Italy was responsible for intelligence gathering in the Mediterranean except for the Moroccan coast which Germany was responsible for along with the region of Gibraltar and the Atlantic. The Axis Navies also participated in the war by direct clandestine combat operations involving the use of submarines. Most notably, in the summer of 1937 Italian submarines were responsible for an intensive campaign of submarine warfare aimed primarily against Republican warships and Republican and Soviet merchant ships but also including ships of other nationalities if they failed to display navigation lights within three miles of the Republican coast or were escorted by Republican warships. The effect of this campaign was to close off the Mediterranean as a direct route for Soviet arms supplies to the Spanish Republic.⁷ During the civil war, Nationalist, Italian or German naval forces sank 44 foreign merchant ships, declared 23 war prizes, and confiscated the cargoes of 98 more. In contrast throughout the war it has been calculated that 180 German and approximately 290 Italian merchant ships carrying arms and munitions sailed to Spain under the cloak of deception and that except for the first two German vessels, all arrived without incident.⁸

In contrast with their Nationalist enemy, the Republicans never succeeded in securing consistent and sufficient material support

from the great powers. The decision of the British, French and Americans not to intervene in the civil war and to impose an arms embargo on both sides irrespective of the legitimacy of the Government at Madrid and later Valencia, deprived the Republicans of the weapons and munitions they needed to stabilise their military fronts. Soviet assistance, while occasionally significant as in the defence of Madrid in October–November 1936, which transformed the Republican defence and made a long drawn out civil war inevitable, and the Ebro offensive in the summer and autumn of 1938, was never sufficient to enable the Republicans properly to fight an offensive war. Despite the considerable logistical difficulties of delivering war material through the Mediterranean in face of the covert Italian naval war on Republican and Soviet shipping which eventually forced the Soviets to reroute their arms deliveries via the Baltic, Atlantic and French territory, the Soviets continued to supply the Republican forces until the last arms shipment was dispatched in December 1938. But the effect of the non-intervention policy of the democratic powers was to condemn the Republic to a hand-to-mouth existence, dependent to some extent on the international black market in arms and vulnerable to the corrupt and deceitful practices of a whole succession of dubious arms dealers.⁹ Moreover, because non-intervention forced the Republican authorities to spend a large proportion of their resources on arms procurement there was less available for sustaining the home front and the necessary priority given to providing food for the Republican armed forces contributed to internal instability and eroded the Republic's legitimacy in the minds of many facing increased hunger and hardship. The effect was to undermine the Republican war effort in face of Franco's determination to conduct a war of annihilation, to ruthlessly crush for the foreseeable and even distant future all and any remnants of Republican Spain.¹⁰

Foreign intervention and non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War was motivated by a range of ideological, political, economic and strategic considerations, some of which were immediate and others more long term but all have been debated at considerable length by historians from the end of the conflict onwards. New evidence has been revealed and emphases shifted over a period of time but what motivated the great powers remains a subject of some contention as does the significance of the civil war in the

origins of the Second World War. In its focus on the civil war this study, which is concerned essentially to analyse the motivations of the Great Powers in the Spanish conflict rather than to engage in a detailed account of the actions and reactions to events as they developed, shares the assumptions of Willard Frank Jr that while it was not a dress rehearsal for, or a microcosm of the Second World War it contributed to both perceptions and misperceptions on the part of the great powers which were a crucial part of the process which led to war in September 1939. The civil war in Spain weakened the democratic societies, albeit to a limited extent, strengthened the dictators, and clarified the alignments but it also led Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Soviet Russia to seriously underestimate the determination of the western European democracies, Britain and France, to resist any further acts of aggression concerning Poland, despite the Nazi–Soviet Pact of August 1939.¹¹

The Spanish conflict also brought Portugal within the radar of the great powers. Long regarded by the others as an ally firmly within Britain's orbit, German and Italian intervention on the same side as Portugal, a fervent supporter of, and contributor to the Nationalist cause, presented a golden opportunity to undermine the Anglo-Portuguese alliance and bring the Iberian lesser power within the Axis orbit alongside Franco's Spain. In seeking to exploit this opportunity the fascist powers forced the British to take a series of measures to counteract their influence so that before the Second World War the Portuguese remained committed to the alliance and after its outbreak prepared to pursue a neutralist policy which leaned benevolently towards the United Kingdom.

After the civil war ended in 1939, Spain and Portugal still maintained the interest and attention of the great powers though Iberian matters no longer occupied a significant position in their priorities and the decision of both countries to adopt a neutralist stance at the outbreak of the Second World War suited the purposes of the belligerent powers. At the outset of the war as far as the Iberian Peninsula was concerned, geographical realities undoubtedly favoured the Anglo-French Allies and it is entirely conceivable that had France not fallen so rapidly in the early summer of 1940 the influence of the Axis powers over Spain and Portugal would have been severely constrained. The French demise, however, left the British vulnerable to a sustained challenge from the

Axis powers which threatened serious military and strategic consequences for Britain's position in the Atlantic and Mediterranean and provided Germany and Italy with a further opportunity to strengthen their Iberian connections in pursuit of their wider imperial ambitions. Accordingly, while ideological issues retained some significance it was essentially economic and strategic considerations which were uppermost in Berlin, Rome, London and eventually Washington. In contrast, Soviet Russia's interest in the Iberian Peninsula had ceased in March 1939 and the influence it continued to exert in Iberian affairs during the early years of the Second World War was entirely negative and indirect. The degree of hostility directed against Soviet communism within the authoritarian Right-wing regimes in Spain and Portugal was considerable and was certainly not underestimated by the Axis powers or by Britain and the United States.

In retrospect, it is clear that the end of 1941 and America's entry into the war following the German invasion of Soviet Russia in June of that year marked a significant turning point in the fortunes of the belligerent powers. Winston Churchill in his wartime memoirs referred to the entry of the United States as the turning point which sealed Hitler's fate and Mussolini's fate and also that of the Japanese: 'All the rest was merely the proper application of overwhelming force'.¹² After 1941 Spain and Portugal would continue to attract the interest of both the Axis powers and the western Allies but the opportunities for the former were again constrained while the threats to the latter were beginning to diminish. From 1942 onwards, Hitler's instructions and directives concerning the Iberian Peninsula focused on measures to counter allied actions rather than to initiate German offensive action and Britain and the United States had no intention whatsoever of threatening its neutrality. The end of 1941 therefore marks a suitable termination date for this study.

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NB: n = endnote; **bold** = extended discussion

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