A Regime in Line with British Interests? The Recognition of General Franco as a Form of Appeasement

SCOTT RAMSAY
UNIVERSIDAD DE LEEDS

When the military rebellion was launched in July 1936 it was not entirely clear what would become of it. The Republican Government managed to suppress it in many major towns and cities, including Madrid, Valencia and Barcelona, and maintained control of major lines of communication and industry. Accordingly, the British Government adopted a wait-and-see approach, but decided within a matter of days that it would not become involved in the conflict. The French Government, on the other hand, initially planned to aid the Republic. However, after Leon Blum, the French Prime Minister, visited London between 23 and 25 July, French policy was altered to one of neutrality. Stanley Baldwin, the British Prime Minister, reportedly told Blum during the visit that if French intervention in Spain provoked a conflict with Italy, Britain would remain neutral.

First and foremost, neutrality was perceived as the best means of preventing the conflict from escalating into a wider European war. Secondly, the British Government recognised the strategic importance of the Iberian Peninsula and the dangers of this being utilised by the fascist powers in the future. A report issued by the British Chiefs of Staff in August 1936 stated that Britain’s interests in the civil war were the maintenance of ‘the territorial integrity of Spain and her possessions’ and ‘of such relations with any Spanish Government which may emerge from this conflict as will ensure benevolent neutrality in the event of our being engaged in a European war.’ Any alliance between Spain and Italy was considered detrimental to British

---

interests. Accordingly, an official Non-Intervention Agreement was readily accepted by the British when it was proposed by the French Government earlier in August, a week after Leon Blum’s visit to London. Anthony Eden, the British Foreign secretary, welcomed the proposal as the best means of avoiding ‘any risk of the complications which might arise were assistance to be afforded from outside Spain to any of the parties engaged in the present conflict.’ Avoiding an escalation of the war and ensuring Spain’s benevolent neutrality became the central themes in Britain’s developing programme of appeasement towards the Spanish rebels.

The literature on British policy in Spain, however, has overwhelmingly argued that neutrality was adopted because of pro-rebel sympathies and fears that a victory for the Republican Government would result in a communist regime on the Iberian Peninsula. Thus ‘malevolent neutrality’ – starving the Republican Government of military aid – would pave the way for a victory for the rebels and ensure the establishment of a regime in Spain that was more in line with British interests. There were certainly many Conservatives that saw this as one benefit of the non-intervention policy, and it is true that since 1917 the potential spread of communism had been a constant source of anxiety for successive British Governments. The evidence of a link between a more general fear of the spread of communism and a fear of a communist regime in Spain, and thus its influence on British policy, however, is somewhat limited.

This paper demonstrates that British neutrality ought to be seen as a strand of the wider policy of general appeasement rather than as a policy put in place to indirectly aid a rebel

---

6 ALPERT, 40-56.
7 Eden to Cambon, 4 Aug. 1936, FO 371/20527, W 7504/62/41.
victory or as an attempt to thwart the spread of communism. By examining British neutrality through the lens of appeasement, this study will enhance our understanding of British diplomacy in the 1930s and the links between non-intervention in Spain and the growing threat from Hitler and Mussolini. Indeed, historians who have focused on Anglo-Spanish relations during the Second World War have shown how a policy of non-intervention continued in Spain after the civil war as a means of appeasing Franco because of wider strategic concerns. In this regard, the appeasement of Franco comes into focus not as a purely tactical concern during Europe’s critical years of 1939-1945 but instead as a sustained strategic programme. This suggests that British non-intervention in Spain was not so much a policy of ‘malevolent neutrality’ towards the Spanish Republic, but rather, as the Chiefs of Staff suggested, one of ensuring the ‘benevolent neutrality’ of Franco in light of the growing fascist threat in Europe. This appeasement was put fully into practice and no longer hindered by diplomatic constraints with the recognition of Franco on 27 February 1939.

Appeasement and Spain

The existing literature on appeasement has focused overwhelmingly on Anglo-German and Anglo-Italian relations with little focus on how appeasement worked with regards to countries of secondary strategic importance such as Spain. The example of British policy in Spain shows that non-intervention shared its aims with wider British foreign policy and was therefore consistent with the objectives of appeasement: avoiding war altogether or, if necessary, fighting a war under more favourable circumstances. Norrin Ripsman and Jack Levy have argued that appeasement was not just a policy of granting concessions to Germany or Italy to avoid war, but has been used for a number of purposes. They identify three types of general appeasement: (1) resolving grievances; (2) diffusing secondary threats; and (3) buying time. In ‘diffusing secondary threats’ Ripsman and Levy identify three subtypes:

i. ‘Conserving resources’ by granting concessions to a secondary adversary to free up resources for use against a primary adversary;


12 Similarly, studies of Chamberlain have neglected his policy in Spain. See Feiling, 297-99, 330-31; Self, 274-75; Nick Smart, Neville Chamberlain (London: Routledge, 2010), 227-28; for a more focused study on Chamberlain and Spain, see Glyn Stone, ‘Neville Chamberlain and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939’, The International History Review, 35:2 (2013) 377-395.
ii. ‘Denying allies’ through appeasing a secondary adversary to keep it from forming an alliance with a primary adversary or giving it military support;

iii. ‘Redirecting the threat’: a stronger version of ‘denying allies’ which involves appeasing a secondary adversary in order to redirect its hostility towards the primary threat.13

The ‘denying allies’ strategy was utilised in Anglo-Italian relations after the Abyssinian crisis to keep Mussolini out of the German orbit.14 This strategy is perhaps more relevant when it comes to Spain. Indeed, in an important strategic location, there existed the potential for a right-wing dictatorship to be established that would have close relations with the fascist powers which the British Government was appeasing. As the civil war progressed and Franco’s forces captured more and more ground while the German and Italian governments poured more assistance into the Iberian Peninsula, it became increasingly evident that this would be the case.

British policy in Spain developed from trying to appear completely neutral at the beginning of the conflict towards directly appeasing Franco when his victory grew more certain. When the fall of Málaga to the rebels was imminent in February 1937, for instance, George Ogilvie-Forbes, the British Chargé d’Affaires, asked the Foreign Office for an increase in British naval strength around the city’s waters to ‘dissuade the insurgents from taking unduly drastic action against the city and its population’.15 Two days later he reported that many of the 150,000 who had fled due to fear of reprisals had been subjected to horrific shell fire and bombing.16 There was much discussion within the Foreign Office about how the British Government could help the Republican refugees fleeing Málaga. However, the decision not to intervene on a humanitarian basis was ultimately determined by ‘political and practical’ considerations as Franco’s ships were blockading the coast and the Foreign Office feared both the possibility of coming into conflict with them and appearing to favour the Spanish Government.17

The British Government was put in a more difficult position when German aircraft, in liaison with Francoist officers, destroyed Guernica.18 It is not known how many deaths

---

14 CROWSON, 69-74.
15 Ogilvie-Forbes to Halifax, 12 Feb. 1937, FO371/21284, W3062/1/41.
17 Ogilvie-Forbes to Foreign Office, Halifax’s reply attached, FO371/21367, W3070/37/41.
18 PRESTON, *Franco*, 243-47
occurred as a result of the bombing, but Ralph Stevenson, the British consul in Bilbao, estimated that Guernica at the time had a population of around 10,000.\textsuperscript{19} Although Eden was disturbed by the deaths at Guernica, the greater concern for the British Government was that it presented a clear demonstration of Germany’s air power which might one day befall Britain.\textsuperscript{20} In the House of Commons on 6 May 1937, while he remained reluctant to cause any risk to Anglo-German relations by launching accusations, Eden expressed the view that the indignant response to the bombing was due to the knowledge that ‘if that kind of thing is repeated and intensifies on a larger scale, it is going to mean a terrible future for Europe to face’.\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, he maintained in his memoirs that the destruction of Guernica had been ‘the first blitz of the Second World War’.\textsuperscript{22} Thus Guernica can be interpreted as the start of a shift in British policy towards Spain, driven less by concerns of a local escalation of the conflict than the broader European strategic significance.

On 29 April, the rebels reached the burning remnants of Guernica and by June it became clear that Bilbao was going to fall.\textsuperscript{23} The Foreign Office was put in a difficult position by the possibility that the Basque Government might request British naval help for an evacuation. Stevenson told the Foreign Office of the likelihood that, in the event of Bilbao falling to the rebels, all prominent members of the Basque Government would be shot. Back in Whitehall, Foreign Office analyst William Montagu-Pollock noted that this was in fact likely to happen due to ‘our previous experience of the insurgents’ attitude towards the Basques and towards humanitarian considerations in general’. However, a list of both the practical difficulties and possible consequences of evacuating the Basques were drawn up. It was thought likely that should the Royal Navy offer assistance in evacuating members of the Basque Government, it would be difficult to justify leaving many others to their fate. The Foreign Office was also concerned that such a heavy reliance on British ships carried the risk of coming into direct conflict with Francoist ships that were endeavouring to blockade the coast.\textsuperscript{24} In the event, the Royal Navy escorted some ships evacuating refugees but the Francoists lamented that this ‘intervention’ was an attack on the prestige of their navy and the sovereignty of Spain. This

\textsuperscript{19} James CABLE, \textit{The Royal Navy and the Siege of Bilbao} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 107-12; Stevenson to Eden, 28 April 1937, FO371/21291, W8661/1/41.


\textsuperscript{21} HC Deb 6 May 1937, vol. 323, c1379.

\textsuperscript{22} Eden, 443.


\textsuperscript{24} Minute by Pollock, 10 July 1937, FO371/21403, W12732/1/41.
diplomatic crisis would drastically affect the thinking of British officials when the question of evacuating Republicans arose in the future.\textsuperscript{25}

British neutrality was put under further strain throughout 1938. In particular, the continuous bombing of civilian areas in and around Republican Barcelona by Italian planes throughout March 1938 evoked indignation among British public opinion which Neville Chamberlain, who became British Prime Minister in May 1937, felt was a threat to his efforts to find a settlement with Mussolini.\textsuperscript{26} Some verbal protests were made over the targeting of civilian areas but Franco insisted that his forces selected only military targets and that in Barcelona, where most of the Republic’s remaining war industry lay, armaments were stored in civilian areas.\textsuperscript{27} He also bemoaned that similar attacks carried out by Republican planes had not aroused such a response from Britain. Robert Hodgson, who had been appointed as the British representative to rebel Spain in November 1937, warned the Foreign Office that in rebel territory there was growing ill-feeling towards the British Government due to this perceived media bias.\textsuperscript{28}

Even when British ships were being bombed by rebel aircraft, Chamberlain refused to do any more than issue a banal protest which he never intended, or at any rate hoped he would never have to, carry further. For instance, in the House of Commons in June 1938, Chamberlain admitted that some attacks on British ships had been deliberate. After being bombarded with questions as to why he did not do more in response, he simply said that he was ‘afraid that while war continues we must expect a succession of these incidents and of the horrors against which we have protested. The one satisfactory solution of the Spanish question would be a termination of the war’.\textsuperscript{29} In July, he said in the Cabinet that if Franco must continue to bomb ships, he ‘must use discretion’ or he might ‘arouse a feeling [in this country] that would force the government to take action’.\textsuperscript{30}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} See Peter ANDERSON, ‘British Maritime Evacuations in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939’, \textit{War in History} (forthcoming, 2017).
\item \textsuperscript{27} Hodgson to Halifax, 26 March 1938, FO371/22606, W3972/9/41. For an earlier example, see Chilton to Eden, 23 March 1937 1937, FO371/21288, W5768/1/41/41.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Hodgson to Halifax, 29 Aug. 1938, FO371/22629, W11582/29/41.
\item \textsuperscript{29} HC Deb 21 June 1938, vol. 337, c943; on the bombing of British ships, see PRESTON, \textit{Franco}, p. 308.
\item \textsuperscript{30} CAB 23/94/4, 6 July 1938.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Chamberlain’s personal feelings were expressed in his private letters. He wrote to his sister Ida on 18 June that ‘if only we could get an armistice all this bombing of civilians and ships would cease and what suffering and misery would be saved.’ Later in the month he wrote to his other sister Hilda that he had gone over ‘every form of retaliation’ but it was clear that none could be effective ‘unless we are prepared to go to war with Franco which might quite possibly lead to war with Italy and Germany and in any case cut right across my policy of general appeasement.’ Thus Chamberlain was always thinking about how policy in Spain affected his wider foreign policy aims.

**Recognising Franco**

Chamberlain went to visit Mussolini personally in Rome in January 1939 but achieved little success on the Spanish issue. By the time of his return to London, the rebels were successfully battling their way through Catalonia towards Barcelona and Franco was nearing total victory over the Republic. Accordingly, Chamberlain was encouraged to start thinking seriously about putting in place plans for recognising Franco’s government. Owen O’Malley, a British representative at Hendaye, affirmed that it was in Britain’s interests to do so and told the Foreign Office on 15 January that early recognition of Franco was essential if the British Government wanted ‘to obtain an ally and play a large part in the reconstruction of Spain’. Here we can see the British Government putting a ‘denying allies’ strategy into practice. This became even more pressing when Franco’s forces entered Barcelona later that month and rendered the Republican war effort hopeless unless the western democracies abandoned the Non-Intervention Agreement. Juan Negrín accepted that this was extremely unlikely and finally admitted defeat in early February 1939. He subsequently informed the British Government that the Republican army would surrender if Franco would agree to make formal declarations that Spain would remain an independent power and not be dominated by the fascist powers; that Spaniards would be free to choose their own form of government; and that military and political leaders would be free to leave the country while there would be no political reprisals for those who stayed. If these conditions were not met, Negrín said that the Republic would continue fighting.

---

31 Neville Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 18 June 1938, NC18/1/1056.
32 Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 25 June 1938, NC18/1/1057.
The Foreign Office welcomed this proposal and asked Hodgson to enquire with Franco’s government whether an arrangement could be made. At the same time, however, members of Franco’s government saw an opportunity to apply pressure to bring about a swift recognition of their regime. General Francisco Gómez-Jordana y Sousa, Franco’s Foreign Minister, told Hodgson that British and French recognition was immaterial to Franco but that its delay would have an effect on the duration of the war. Playing on British humanitarian concerns, a member of Franco’s diplomatic staff also told Eric Phipps, the British ambassador at Paris, that unless Britain recognised Franco he would launch an offensive ‘entailing the slaughter of thousands of government troops’. Hodgson therefore warned that delays in recognising Franco’s Government would only be to the detriment of Anglo-Spanish relations while simultaneously prolonging the conflict.

Delaying recognition was in direct contrast to the British desire to see an end to the war at the earliest possible moment. It also allowed more time for the German and Italian regimes to entrench themselves further in Spain while pressure on the British Government to bring an end to non-intervention was mounting among opponents of the policy. Calls for abandoning non-intervention and aiding the Republic even came from within the Conservative Party. Vyvyan Adams, the vehemently anti-appeasement Conservative MP for Leeds West, appraised British policy in Spain for The Daily Telegraph. He criticised non-intervention for having allowed the governments of Germany and Italy to establish themselves in Spain and advocated aiding the Republic to prevent them from doing so any further. Adams received numerous letters congratulating him for speaking out on the policy. However, Lord Halifax, who replaced Eden as Foreign Secretary in February 1938, responded to Adams personally, expressing his confusion as to why he would advocate taking an action which would ‘give rise to the very situation which non-intervention was designed to prevent’. Halifax was referring not only to the potential of escalating the conflict by siding with the Republic, but also to pushing Franco further into the arms of Hitler and Mussolini by doing so.

The policy pursued by the British Government was designed to prevent such an alliance and, it was hoped, ensure Franco’s benevolent neutrality in a future European war. Indeed,

---

35 Phipps to Halifax, 16 Feb. 1939, FO371/24152, W2823/1443/41.
when Hodgson had been sent to enquire whether Franco would agree to those conditions laid out by Negrín, Chamberlain wrote that he would not allow delays in negotiations as it might prevent the British Government from ‘establishing excellent relations with Franco who at present seems well disposed to us’. He also hoped that ‘if the Italians are not in too bad a temper, we might get Franco’.\(^{40}\) The Cabinet had already discussed earlier in the month that ‘so long as His Majesty’s Government maintained its present attitude towards General Franco’s Administration [withholding recognition]’, they were ‘impotent to promote one of the principle purposes of British policy in Spain, namely, the effective combating of German and Italian influence within General Franco’s regime’.\(^{41}\) Halifax had also argued in the Foreign Office that it ‘is of primary importance to efface as soon as possible the bitterness at present prevailing against His Majesty’s Government among General Franco’s adherents’ and place the British in a ‘far better position than at present to combat by diplomatic means the excessive influence of Germany and Italy on the course of the evolution of the new Spain’. He noted that Germany and Italy would dislike ‘our belated bid to snatch from them and secure the fruits of General Franco’s victory’, but also that ‘there is very much more to be gained than there is to be risked by early recognition of Franco’.\(^{42}\)

Despite the urgency felt by Chamberlain and Halifax, they had not only brought to Franco’s attention those conditions laid out by Negrín, but also offered to act in a mediatory capacity if they were accepted.\(^{43}\) Chamberlain wrote to his sister Hilda on 19 February that he was ‘very hopeful about Spain’ after hearing that the Spanish Government was willing to surrender if Franco would give ‘reasonable assurances about reprisals’.\(^{44}\) However, unwilling to accept anything less than unconditional surrender, Franco rejected the proposal when it was brought to him.\(^{45}\) Accordingly, Pablo de Azcárate, the Republican ambassador at London, insisted that his government would adjust its conditions and surrender if only their clause regarding political reprisals was agreed. Halifax allowed time for this to first be approved by Negrín and agreed to then bring it to Franco’s attention. However, neither the Foreign Office nor Chamberlain was keen on there being any delays. When discussing the issue in the Cabinet, it was agreed that it was better to recognise Franco ‘as soon as possible’ because the longer

\(^{40}\) Chamberlain to Hilda, 19 Feb. 1939, NC18/1/1086.
\(^{41}\) Extracts from Cabinet Conclusions, 27 Feb. 1939, FO371/24132, W3444/1443/41.
\(^{42}\) Cabinet Offices to Foreign Office, 16 Feb. 1939, FO371/24153, W2777/1443/41; Ida to Chamberlain, 9 Feb. 1939, NC18/2/1110.
\(^{43}\) CAB 23/97, 15 Feb. 1939.
\(^{44}\) Chamberlain to Hilda, 19 Feb. 1939, NC18/1/1086.
recognition was held back ‘the less value it will have in Franco’s eyes’. Chamberlain had written to his sister that he had ‘kept back recognition to see if we can get this surrender arranged as clearly that is the best order’ but expressed categorically that he would not delay it if negotiations dragged on for too long. For reasons that are still not entirely clear, the message did not reach Negrín until it was too late and the British Government decided to press on with its recognition of Franco without any agreement in place.

Accordingly, focus shifted to the practicalities of recognising Franco and to what would become of Britain’s diplomatic relations with the Republican Government. This issue presented further difficulties for the British Government because significant portions of southern and central Spain still remained under Republican control in early 1939. Admiral C.G. Jarrett asked the Foreign Office a few days before the recognition of Franco if he was correct in assuming that recognition would be simultaneously withdrawn from the Republican Government when it was granted to Franco. He was informed that while de jure recognition would in fact be withdrawn, the Republic would continue to have de facto recognition over the territory still under its control.

This was just one of two possible courses outlined by the Foreign Office, and this policy of continuing to recognise the Republic as the de facto government in territory still under its control was subsequently thrown out. This course of action outlined to Jarrett had been regarded as the ‘best option on a practical level’ because the alternative – withdrawing any form of recognition from the Republic – implied that the British Government viewed the Republic as merely ‘disorganised rebels’ and considered the war to be over. This, the Foreign Office believed, would have been ‘no doubt satisfactory to Franco, but hardly in accordance with the practical facts of the situation’. Ultimately, however, the British Government found itself being forced into taking this approach. It was already feared that to acknowledging de facto recognition of the Republic in some parts of Spain would ‘arouse Franco’s resentment’ but the final nail in the coffin for the Republic’s diplomatic relations with Britain came on 25 February when Hodgson warned the Foreign Office that Franco would not even acknowledge

---

46 CAB 24/283/19, 13 Feb. 1939.
47 Chamberlain to Hilda, 19 Feb. 1939, NC18/1/1086.
50 Jarrett to Howard, 24 Feb. 1939, FO371/24152, W3358/1443/41.
recognition of his government unless the British ‘completely break ties with the “Reds”’. Accordingly, Chamberlain decided that recognition would be withdrawn from the Republican Government. Halifax broke the news to Pablo de Azcárate on 25 February 1939 that ‘we are going to recognise Franco – your diplomatic privileges must now come to an end’. He then told the Duke of Alba, Franco’s ambassador at London, that Britain, in conjunction with the French, was going to recognise Franco and that a new British ambassador would be appointed in due course.

On Monday 27 February, the British and French Governments formally recognised Franco’s regime as the only legitimate government in Spain. By this point, Franco already enjoyed full recognition of Germany, Italy, Portugal, Japan and the Vatican, among others. Chamberlain announced to the House of Commons that the decision had been made over the weekend, and backed up the decision with an explanation of the current military situation in Spain:

As a result of the fall of Barcelona and overrunning of Catalonia, General Franco is now in control of the greater part of Spanish territory both on and beyond the mainland. Included in this territory are the most important industrial centres in Spain and the sources of most of her productions. Even if the Republican forces in the southern sector should continue to maintain some show of resistance, there can be no doubt now of the ultimate issue of the struggle, the prolongation of which can only result in further suffering and loss of life.

It is clear that the decision to recognise Franco was eased by the knowledge that his military victory was guaranteed and imminent. Some historians have suggested that the decision to grant unconditional recognition to Franco had been taken a few weeks earlier on 8 February but the decision to announce it publicly was put off. If Chamberlain justified recognising Franco on the premise that after the fall of Barcelona there was absolutely no possibility of anything other than a Francoist victory then this is plausible. At any rate, the British Government had certainly taken the decision to recognise Franco earlier than Chamberlain liked to admit. However, that it would be unconditional surrender clearly had not been fully decided as negotiating conditions, especially regarding reprisals, was clearly still on the table,

54 EDWARDS, p. 193.
55 The Times, 28 Feb. 1939, 14; HC Deb 28 Feb. 1939, vol. 344, c1118.
56 See, for example, PRESTON, Last Days, 144-47.
as was the question of what would become of British diplomatic relations with the Republican Government.

**Abandoning Humanitarianism**

British humanitarian activities that helped supporters of the Republican Government had always met with a hostile reaction from the Francoists, as discussed previously with the cases of Málaga and the Basque country, and therefore a cautious attitude to humanitarianism was kept in place throughout the civil war. Accordingly, when the British Government had recognised Franco and hoped to establish a good relationship with the new Spain, it decided to not only sever diplomatic ties with the Republic but also to wash its hands of humanitarian responsibilities.⁵⁷

Earlier in the civil war, Franco had put in place military tribunals which offered a façade of legitimacy to the repression being unleashed on Republicans and to project a better image of his regime abroad. In early 1939, along with assurances regarding the territorial integrity of Spain, Franco also gave public assurances that there would be no ‘political’ reprisals which Chamberlain used to combat domestic criticism of his policy.⁵⁸ He said in the House of Commons that the British Government had ‘noted with satisfaction the public statements of General Franco concerning the determination of himself and his government to take proceedings only in the cases of those against whom criminal charges are laid’. Clement Attlee, leader of the British Labour Party, followed with a scathing attack on the fact that recognition had been given unconditionally and that the only assurances against political reprisals had been ‘a mere statement from Franco that no one except law breakers will be dealt with’. ‘But the law’, Attlee went on, ‘is what General Franco makes it’.⁵⁹

Indeed, the British Government was well aware of the violent fate that awaited so many in Spain.⁶⁰ Franco had issued the Law of Political Responsibilities on 13 February which ensured that anybody who had supported the Republic after October 1934 could be considered

---

⁶⁰ CAB 23/97, 15 Feb. 1939.
a criminal and anybody who had fought for the Republic during the civil war was guilty of military rebellion.61 Before the Law of Political Responsibilities, the British Government had estimated that there were at least 50,000 persons in the south of Spain who were in danger of their lives on account of their political or military activities if captured by the rebels.62 Aside from those in the south, it was recognised that hundreds of thousands more were in territory from which escape was possible.63 Already by the end of February, the French Government had taken in some 300,000 Spanish women, children and elderly men at a considerable daily cost but many more were expected to flee across the border.64

The French Government, however, was much more willing to assist in their evacuation than the British Government which was trying to maintain its impartial stance in order to appease Franco. In early February Eleanor Rathbone, an independent MP, had asked whether the government would be willing to admit Spanish Republican officials whose lives were in danger in the event of Franco’s victory. George Mounsey, a Foreign Office Assistant Under-Secretary prevaricated, avoiding making an executive decision by replying that an interdepartmental meeting needed to be held to discuss the issue before giving an official answer. Mounsey suggested to his colleagues that Spanish refugees ought to be categorised into two types: non-combatants and combatants. He hoped that most of the former would return to Spain but recognised the possibility that considerable numbers would not and therefore become ‘more or less a permanent liability’. The ‘combatants’ were believed to be in ‘an even worse plight’ but Mounsey argued that there were ‘obvious objections to dealing with their case on ordinary charitable lines’. At any rate, it was hoped that the French Government would continue handling the issue without much of a commitment from Britain.65

The French Government had in fact already asked for British assistance in the maintenance of Spanish refugees but received a non-committal reply.66 Although the Foreign Office had in the past been willing to assist in the evacuation and maintenance of refugees to a certain extent, it avoided going beyond a point from which its impartial attitude towards the

---

63 Foreign Office minute by Pollock, 10 Feb. 1939, FO371/24153, W2391/2082/41.
64 HL Deb 9 March 1939, vol. 344, c135.
65 Foreign Office minutes by Mallet, 3 Feb. 1939, and Mounsey, 6 Feb. 1939, FO371/24153, W2082/2082/41; also see STONE, ‘Neville Chamberlain’, 384.
66 Foreign Office minutes by Mallet, 3 Feb. 1939, and Mounsey, 6 Feb. 1939, FO371/24153, W2082/2082/41.
civil war could be challenged.67 This remained the case in early 1939. For instance, when Republican officials in Madrid requested assistance for evacuating between 5,000 and 10,000 persons wishing to leave Spain, the Foreign Office made a list of the pros and cons of offering assistance. Humanitarianism was the main factor in favour and it was pondered whether Franco might be happy for the British Government to do so since it would reduce the number of dissidents within his regime. However, recalling Franco’s resentment over British evacuations of refugees in the past which he considered a form of intervention, it was feared that doing so again was likely to arouse the same resentment.68

In early 1939 the Foreign Office recognised some additional reasons for not assisting with evacuations. Firstly, the situation was considered far less manageable due to the numbers that were now likely to leave Spain. The British consul in Valencia, Abbington Gooden, received enquiries from Spanish officials regarding the possibility of their evacuation in the event of the rebels capturing the rest of Spain. He was informed that no Spaniards were to be evacuated unless they formed part of an exchange commission or were in immediate danger because the numbers were expected be so vast that it was not possible to help more than a ‘small fraction of them’.69

Secondly, there was a concern in the Foreign Office that such assistance might prolong the war. On the one hand, it was possible that if those still fighting knew they were able to escape Spain safely, the assistance in doing so would encourage them to give up the fight and bring an end to the war sooner. On the other hand, however, it could also have encouraged many to continue fighting if they knew that if their efforts failed they would simply have been able to escape on a British ship.70 Indeed, the Foreign Office urged British consuls in Spain not to give Republicans promises concerning evacuations because it was felt that ‘the expectation of being able to get away on a British warship at the last moment’ would encourage many to continue fighting.71 Although this reluctance to offer any substantial assistance in evacuating refugees resulted in many being unable to leave Spain, the British stance was determined by the core objectives of non-intervention: bringing a war to an end as soon as possible and establishing good relations with the victor.

68 Stevenson to Foreign Office, 9 July 1937, minute by Pollock, 10 July 1937 FO371/24103, W12732/1/41.
69 Gooden to Foreign Office, 26 Feb.1939, FO371/24153, W2247/2082/41.
70 Gooden to Foreign Office, 28 Feb. 1939, FO371/24153, W3571/2082/41.
71 Gooden to Foreign Office, 26 Feb. 1939, FO371/24153, W2247/2082/41.
Conclusion

There was continuity in British policy in Spain from the summer of 1936 through to the end of the civil war in 1939 and beyond.72 It has been suggested by Moradiellos that British policy in Spain was subordinated to appeasement only after it became clear that the war would be a prolonged one and Germany and Italy became heavily involved.73 This article has demonstrated that the wider programme of general appeasement in Europe was always an integral part of British policy in Spain. First and foremost, the British Government wanted to avoid war in Europe. British officials recognised, of course, that war was a real possibility and therefore better conditions needed to be created to facilitate fighting in one. Throughout the civil war, the British Government became increasingly aware of the fact that Franco would eventually win and, as the prestige of the German and Italian regimes was bound up with Franco’s ultimate victory, the British realised the importance of treading lightly in their diplomatic relations with his government.

Indeed, there is no reason why non-intervention in Spain, and more specifically the reluctance to aid the Republic, should be considered so different to British policy towards Czechoslovakia. For instance, as Hitler’s intentions for Czechoslovakia became more evident during 1938, Chamberlain offered his assistance to Hitler in bringing about an armistice to prevent Germany taking military action. As Hitler was interested in improving Anglo-German relations, they came to the agreement, along with France and Italy, of annexing portions of Czechoslovakia that had a German majority population.74 Chamberlain had said as early as March 1938 that ‘you only have to look at the map to see that nothing that France or we could do could possibly save Czechoslovakia from being overrun by the Germans, if they wanted to do it … therefore we could not help Czechoslovakia – she would simply be a pretext for going to war with Germany’.75

In Spain, Chamberlain sought an armistice and offered to act as an intermediary between the two sides. When this was rejected by Franco, the Foreign Office considered offering de facto recognition of the Republican Government in areas of Spain still under its control but abandoned this idea when it was, unsurprisingly, also rejected Franco. Thus the policy of appeasement in Spain determined that Franco would have the unconditional

72 PRESTON, Franco, 461.
73 MORADIELLOS, Neutralidad benévola, 256-268.
74 CAB, 24/279/14, 6 Oct. 1938.
75 FEILING, 325.
recognition of the British Government. When Hitler violated the Munich agreement in March 1939 and invaded the remainder of Czechoslovakia, just as when Franco rejected all proposals for any form of conditional surrender, there was very little the British Government could do without resorting to military action. Rather than a fear of the spread of communism forcing the British Government into adopting ‘malevolent neutrality’, pragmatic neutrality in response to the threat posed by the rise of fascism arguably had a more significant impact on the adoption and development of British neutrality in Spain.

This also highlights the extent to which Anglo-Spanish relations were not simply a case of a Great Power directing its policy towards a smaller power: the British accepted that Franco possessed considerable agency and his approval had to be courted, not taken for granted. Whilst historians of the ‘malevolent neutrality’ school focus on British initiative and its impact on Spain, by linking the Spanish conflict with wider appeasement, this new interpretation shows instead that British neutrality was not just a one-way policy but equally about ensuring reciprocal benevolent neutrality from Franco.

Ultimately, British self-interest took precedence over anything else in Spain. Regardless of British attitudes to either side in the civil war, the British Government from the beginning to the end of the conflict wanted to ensure that the war did not escalate into a wider European conflict. Assuming this objective would be achieved, ensuring that whatever government emerged in Spain would adopt a benevolent neutrality in a future European war was deemed essential. A policy of neutrality offered the best means of doing this. Not only did it entail fewer risks of military conflict, but it also allowed for the British Government to continue its wider policy of general appeasement in Europe while putting it in a position from which it could develop cordial relations with whichever side emerged from the conflict in Spain. As the civil war progressed and it became increasingly clear to the British Government that Franco would win, this ‘denying allies’ strategy was able to be gradually put into practice and would remain at the core of Anglo-Spanish relations in the aftermath of the civil war and during the Second World War.