

Churchill and Spain: More Sancho than Quixote?

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Abstract

This article offers a detailed analysis of Winston Churchill's relationship with Spain over the course of his long and eventful political and personal life. The article focuses on three key episodes: Churchill's ambivalent stance during the Spanish Civil War; his leadership and policy towards Spain during the crucial years of the Second World War; and the memory and legacy of Churchill in Spain, particularly in relation to his wartime role. The article argues that Churchill's engagement with Spain reveals a recurring tension between a quixotic impulse – rooted in his aristocratic and monarchist sensibilities, and in a sentimental view of Spanish history – and a more pragmatic, Sancho Panza-like realism, which became especially prominent during the Second World War.

Winston Churchill's relationship with Spain reveals a series of diverse, and at times contradictory, aspects of his political character. Through this prism, one observes the defining traits that shaped his worldview and approach to international affairs – traits oscillating between deep sentimentality and sharp political judgement.

Churchill harboured a genuine sympathy for Spain. His profound historical awareness inclined him to idealize both the shortcomings of the Restoration period (1874–1931) and the virtues of the Spanish politicians who dominated that era, in whom he recognized an aristocratic ideal closely aligned with his own values. To Churchill, Spain remained the heir to a great European empire – 'one of the oldest branches in the tree of European nations' – which had once rivalled, and was ultimately bested by, England, thereafter relegated from the geopolitical forefront.¹ Like many Englishmen of his class and outlook, Churchill regarded Spain and her people as embodying a deep sense of honour, an attractive bravery and a quixotic spirit that had reached its apogee in the shared struggle with Britain to expel Napoleon from the Iberian Peninsula. For Churchill, Spain was an old European nation which, in his vision of a fairer and more stable order, ought to occupy a prominent place in continental affairs. Yet, it was also a country marked by certain atavistic, even dangerous and unsettling, rituals – vestiges of nineteenth-century misery – which led successive British politicians to a single conclusion: to keep clear of the Spanish hornet's nest.

It is worth noting that the founder of Churchill's family line, John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, acquired his fortune and fame in a war that, while essentially European, originated and played out in Spain: the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14). Churchill greatly admired his illustrious ancestor, to whom he devoted a monumental biography, and this connection may have reinforced his affinity for Spain. Indeed, while the Spanish crisis reached its denouement after the general election of

¹ Winston Churchill, *Great Contemporaries* (New York, 1937), p. 183.

1936, Churchill spent much of that summer at Chartwell, his country retreat, working on the fourth volume of his Marlborough opus.²

This historical sensibility was accompanied by another hallmark of Churchill's character: his tendency to sentimentalize life and politics. While this sometimes resulted in notable misjudgements, it also endowed his outlook with a depth of feeling rare among statesmen of his stature. Nowhere is this duality more evident than in Churchill's attitude towards the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), a context in which his political ambiguity and emotional complexity gave rise to what might be termed his 'quixotic thinking'. This is a theme to which this article returns, particularly regarding Churchill's response to the war and its broader implications for Britain's posture towards Francoist Spain.

In contrast, the Second World War offers an ideal vantage point from which to assess Churchill's most admirable political instincts. During this global conflict, he displayed exceptional precision and sensitivity in reading the political rhythms of Britain and the wider international context. Churchill emerged as the central figure among the Atlantic Allies in shaping policy towards Franco's Spain, skilfully tempering the more aggressive inclinations of the United States and elements within the British establishment itself. In doing so, he showed a keen appreciation of the tragic predicament of the Spanish people – an empathy grounded in long-standing personal and historical affinities.

Churchill was no stranger to Spain, either geographically or culturally. He had travelled in the country, maintained privileged relationships with prominent Spaniards, and was acutely conscious that his family's military fame had been forged in a war in which Spain had played a pivotal role. In selecting the title for this article, reference is made to two central figures in Spanish literary history – Don Quixote and his squire, Sancho Panza – whose contrasting personalities frame the analysis. The idealism of Don Quixote stands in opposition to Sancho's realism and pragmatism. There is, arguably, something of both figures in Churchill's relationship with Spain. He held an idealized image of the country, shaped by his own historical imagination. This idealism was visible in his monarchist sympathies and in his attachment to an aristocratic ideal, which he saw, albeit imperfectly, reflected in Restoration Spain. Thus, when this Spain fell with the arrival of the Second Republic, Churchill's perspective during his 'Wilderness Years' became distinctly Quixotic; he was willing to entertain what might be described as chimerical notions about the conflict's nature and management.

It can be argued that, in his analysis of the Spanish Civil War, Churchill's rational calculation as a skilled politician failed to resolve the dilemma created by his sentimental hostility towards the Republican side and his initial sympathy for the Nationalists, whom he believed were fighting to restore the Spain he had known in his youth. Nevertheless, upon assuming the premiership during the Second World War, Churchill – without entirely relinquishing his historically rooted perspective – formulated a policy towards Spain more akin to Sancho Panza's realism. He resisted any temptation to tilt at Castilian windmills, as Don Quixote does in Cervantes' novel, and as some around him might have preferred. This realism makes Churchill, without doubt, a pivotal figure in understanding the history of Spain in those years, and in appreciating the complexity of his own character.

The article opens with a bibliographical review of the main studies that have examined Churchill's relationship with Spain, tracing how historical interpretations

² Martin Gilbert, *Churchill: The Wilderness Years* (London, 2004), p. 161. For Churchill's biography of his ancestor, see Winston Churchill, *Marlborough: His Life and Times* (Chicago, IL, 2003).

of this subject have evolved. It then focuses on the key episodes that defined this complex, and at times contradictory, relationship, particularly during the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. Special attention is given to Churchill's position during the Civil War, when his political influence was limited, and to the decisive role he later played in shaping Britain's and the Allies' policy towards Franco's Spain during the global conflict. The article's principal contribution lies in the presentation of a holistic perspective on the relationship between Winston Churchill and Spain. This relationship is analysed, first, in connection with Churchill's own political biography, thereby offering a novel interpretative framework, and, second, in relation to the evolving rhythms of Anglo-Spanish relations and the broader transformation of the United Kingdom's position in global politics, which underwent a profound reconfiguration during the period under examination. Beyond engagement with the existing scholarly literature, the article is grounded in an extensive analysis of primary sources from both British and Spanish archives.³

A nebulous corner of Churchill studies: Churchill and Spain in historiography

The relationship between Winston Churchill and Spain, broadly understood across his long political and personal trajectory, has attracted sustained attention among both Spanish and Anglophone historians. Although during the crucial moment of that relationship – the Second World War – Spain occupied a relevant place in Churchill's political thinking and strategic planning, its importance remained secondary when compared to the major actors of the conflict. Likewise, the Spanish Civil War drew Churchill's attention in a particularly intense way, though at a time when he held no direct political responsibility.

When examining the bibliography on Churchill and Spain, a transversal reality emerges: most of the major biographies – among them those by Martin Gilbert, Paul Addison, Andrew Roberts, Roy Jenkins and Richard Toye – accord Spain only a marginal role within the larger scope of Churchill's life.⁴ This relative neglect reflects, in part, the nature of the connection itself, which was tangential within the global context of Churchill's political career. Furthermore, these studies, largely based on secondary sources and on Churchill's own published writings, tend to offer a general view of his perception of Spain and its shifting political landscape, marked by the succession of monarchy, republic, and dictatorship.

This general approach – solidly grounded in secondary sources but often lacking nuance – can be seen, for instance, in the treatment of Churchill's early experience in the Cuban War of Independence (1895–98). This episode, frequently described as his 'baptism of fire', is usually portrayed in broad, anecdotal terms as an adventurous episode within his formative years. Yet, it was, in fact, Churchill's first real and documented encounter with Spain and with the Spanish military world – an experience that helped shape his earliest impressions of the country and its imperial reality.⁵ Churchill's later contacts with Spain included his meetings with

³ In preparing this article for publication in English, the author has used digital resources, with the application of such tools being confined to translation and language editing purposes. All content is original and has been produced solely by the author.

⁴ Andrew Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny* (New York, 2018), Richard Toye, *Churchill's Empire: The World That Made Him and the World He Made* (London, 2010); Roy Jenkins, *Churchill* (London, 2001).

⁵ While the major Churchill biographies tend to reduce his Cuban experience to a vivid but ultimately anecdotal episode within a richly textured life, a group of scholars – particularly Spanish and Cuban – have significantly deepened and refined its interpretation, demonstrating that the episode was genuinely formative. For two texts that identify early traces of Churchill's imperial reasoning and strategic self-awareness in this context, see David Sarias, "'Una forma extraordinaria de proceder': Winston Churchill en la guerra de Cuba (1895)", *Revista de Historia Militar*,

King Alfonso XIII, to whom he devoted a chapter in his book *Great Contemporaries*. This was written during the 1930s and reflected his impressions of Restoration Spain and its political decline – a portrayal marked by evident warmth and, at moments, by an almost idealized view of the monarch. Churchill approached Alfonso XIII with considerable sympathy, shaped by the deep sentimental attachment that the monarchical cause, and particularly the Spanish monarchy, consistently inspired in him.⁶ This representation stands in clear contrast to his later and, as will be seen, pronounced hostility towards Republican Spain.

Churchill's position regarding the Spanish Civil War has naturally become a focal point of scholarly attention and historiographical debate. His published writings on the conflict, collected in *Step by Step 1936–1939*, constituted a principal record of his public stance.⁷ The most detailed scholarly treatment of this subject remains *Quo Vadis, Hispania? Winston Churchill y la Guerra Civil Española (1936–1939)* by Enrique Moradiellos – the academic publication of his inaugural lecture at the prestigious Real Academia de la Historia.⁸ Frank Hotchkiss has recently published a monograph, *Churchill, Franco and the Spanish Civil War*, which, although not based on primary sources, provides an engaging and comprehensive overview of the subject, extending its analysis into the years of the Second World War.⁹ These works have added to an existing literature on the European dimensions of the war.¹⁰ Taken together, these studies form the essential historiographical foundation for any analysis of Churchill's relationship with Spain between 1936 and 1945.

The literature on the United Kingdom, Spain and the Second World War is extensive and reflects diverse interpretations. Javier Tusell's *Franco, España y la Segunda Guerra Mundial: Entre el Eje y la Neutralidad* stands as the seminal work of a new generation of Spanish historians who, following the country's transition to democracy, renewed the historiography of the Franco regime – particularly of its most controversial period, the years of the Second World War.¹¹ This research has tended to crystallize into two principal lines: those who regard Franco's pragmatic neutrality as the defining feature of the era, and those who emphasize his ideological identification with the Axis powers up to 1943. The Second World War undoubtedly epitomizes the encounters, contradictions and crossroads that defined Winston Churchill's

119 (2016), pp. 119–32; and Luis Felipe Martínez Viqueira, 'La primera batalla de Churchill', *Revista Ejército*, 768 (pp. 98–101). On the award of the *Cruz del Mérito Militar con distintivo rojo* and Churchill's reception by Spanish military authorities in this period, see Gustavo Adolfo Delgado Diestro, 'Un británico condecorado con la Cruz Roja al Mérito Militar', *Armas y Cuerpos*, 155 (2024), pp. 81–4. For a broader contextualization of the Cuban campaign, see Hal Klepak, *Churchill Comes of Age: Cuba 1895* (Stroud, 2017). For a Cuban perspective, see Lourdes María Méndez Vargas, *Arroyo Blanco, la ruta cubana de Churchill: Un episodio de la guerra de 1895* (Sancti Spiritus, 2014). The wider imperial and colonial background is further illuminated in Hugh Thomas's *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (London, 1971) and Juan F. García, *Martínez Campos y la pacificación de Cuba: La Guerra de los Diez Años y el Pacto del Zanjón* (Madrid, 1995).

⁶ Churchill, *Great Contemporaries*, pp. 177–87.

⁷ Winston S. Churchill, *Step by Step: Political Writings 1936–1939* (New York, 1939).

⁸ Enrique Moradiellos, *Quo Vadis, Hispania? Winston Churchill y la Guerra Civil Española (1936–1939)* (Madrid, 2021). Moradiellos's earlier *Neutralidad benévola* remains the principal reference for understanding British policy towards the conflict and the diplomatic environment in which Churchill's reflections were produced: Enrique Moradiellos, *Neutralidad benévola* (Oviedo, 1990).

⁹ Frank Hotchkiss, *Churchill, Franco and the Spanish Civil War* (Glasgow, 2024).

¹⁰ On the international dimensions of the Spanish Civil War, see Paul Preston, *La República asediada: Hostilidad internacional y conflictos internos durante la Guerra Civil* (Barcelona, 1999); Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge* (London, 2006); Enrique Moradiellos, *El reñidero de Europa: Las dimensiones internacionales de la Guerra Civil Española* (Barcelona, 2001); Michael Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War* (London, 1994); Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge, 1997); Tom Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge, 1991); and Gaynor Johnson (ed.), *The International Context of the Spanish Civil War* (Newcastle, 2009).

¹¹ Javier Tusell, *Franco, España y la Segunda Guerra Mundial: Entre el Eje y la Neutralidad* (Madrid, 1995).

long and intricate relationship with Spain throughout his political career. While Churchill emerged as the man of the hour in British politics, leading the nation in its resistance against Nazism, Francisco Franco – having become *Caudillo* and dictator in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War – stood as his necessary alter ego in the Spanish tragedy. Two totemic figures in the history of their respective nations, they have naturally invited comparison and parallel study. Following in the tradition of comparative biographies such as those of Alan Bullock, two works stand out as fundamental in this field, both focused primarily on the Second World War context: Enrique Moradiellos's *Franco frente a Churchill* and Richard Wigg's *Churchill and Franco*.¹² Moradiellos's study – still awaiting a much-needed English translation – is undoubtedly the more ambitious and comprehensive of the two, offering a deeply documented and interpretative analysis essential to understanding the complex interaction between Churchill and Franco during the war years. Wigg's book, while valuable in its own right, is more limited in scope and less exhaustive in its bibliographical and interpretative ambition.

In line with the points outlined above, general works on Churchill or on the British war effort, which he led as Prime Minister, devote only secondary and generalized attention to Spain.¹³ As it has been argued in *Entre la antorcha y la esvástica*, Spain played a fundamental role in British planning on the eve of Operation Torch – a planning that was both military and political, and that was in large part preceded by Churchill's strategic foresight.¹⁴ This aspect, however, occupies only a secondary position in the general bibliography on the North African landings, where the Spanish dimension rarely receives the relevance it held in Allied planning in 1942.¹⁵

The relationship between Winston Churchill and Spain – and, in a broader sense, the political relationship between Great Britain and Spain across the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War and the immediate post-war period – thus forms a revealing microcosm. It illustrates both the talents and ambivalences of Churchill as a statesman, and the geopolitical transformations that led Spain to shift from viewing Britain as a central, perhaps *the* central, pivot of its foreign policy, to perceiving it as a secondary actor amid the growing predominance of the United States. Parallel to this, Britain was gradually compelled to abandon its earlier aspiration to exert decisive influence over Iberian affairs, reflecting the post-1945 displacement of Europe's political axis towards the Atlantic world. In this sense, there remains a clear need for further work in English that, from a Spanish perspective and drawing upon the rich and under-used Spanish sources, might deepen our understanding of Churchill's perceptions and attitudes towards Spain during the Civil War, and – above all – of Spain's role and political weight in shaping Churchill's grand strategic vision as a wartime leader during the Second World War.

¹² Enrique Moradiellos, *Franco frente a Churchill: España y Gran Bretaña en la Segunda Guerra Mundial (1939–1945)* (Barcelona, 2005). Richard Wigg, *Churchill and Spain: The Survival of the Franco Regime, 1940–1945* (London, 2005).

¹³ On British negotiation strategies and economic diplomacy towards Francoist Spain, see Denis Smyth, *Diplomacy and Strategy of Survival: British Policy and Franco Spain, 1940–1941* (Cambridge, 1986); and Christian Leitz, 'More carrot than stick: British economic warfare and Spain, 1941–1944', *Twentieth Century British History*, 9/2 (1998), pp. 246–73. On intelligence and covert operations, see Ángel Viñas, *Sobornos: De cómo Churchill y March compraron a los generales de Franco* (Barcelona, 2016). On the Hoare mission and its legacy, see Emilio Sáenz-Francés and José Manuel Sáenz Rotko, 'Diplomats in the Fray', in *Memories of the Second World War in Neutral Europe, 1945–2023* (London, 2023), pp. 115–26; Michael Alpert, 'Las relaciones anglo-hispanas...', *Revista de Política Internacional*, 160 (1978), pp. 14–15; and Samuel Hoare, *Ambassador on Special Mission* (London, 1946). For Spanish primary perspectives, see Rafael Gómez Jordana, *Milicia y diplomacia* (Burgos, 2002). On US–Spanish wartime relations, see Joan María Thomàs, *Roosevelt y Franco* (Barcelona, 2007); and *La batalla del wolframio* (Madrid, 2010).

¹⁴ Emilio Sáenz-Francés, *Entre la antorcha y la esvástica: Franco en la encrucijada de la Segunda Guerra Mundial* (San Sebastián de los Reyes, 2009).

¹⁵ Spain is mostly neglected, for instance, in Rick Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942–1943* (New York, 2002).

Quixotic Churchill: The Spanish civil war and the new European order

In July 1936, a military uprising against Spain's Popular Front government sparked a civil conflict that would devastate the country for four years. The war became a pawn in European diplomacy, as communists and the German and Italian fascists turned Spain into a proxy battlefield amid the continent's brutal political struggles. In the midst of the British debate over the United Kingdom's response to the conflict stood Winston Churchill: outspoken and prominent, yet with little sway over his party or government. By 1936, he was one of the most isolated figures in the Conservative ranks.

As stated at the outset of this article, Winston Churchill's interpretation of the Spanish Civil War – at a moment when he lacked direct political power – was shaped by what may be described as a sentimental, even quixotic, vision of Spain. In 1936, at the height of his Wilderness Years, Churchill was offering a realistic and perceptive reading of political developments in Europe.¹⁶ He recognized the threat posed by the rise of National Socialism and Fascism, and a new international scenario that rendered appeasement policies, such as those championed by the governments of the day, entirely unviable.

It has been argued that under the pressure felt by 1936 with the rise of Nazi Germany, Churchill somewhat softened his anti-communism in light of the possibility that the Soviet Union might become a necessary ally in the impending struggle against fascist totalitarianisms. As Roy Jenkins has stated, party colleagues jokingly began to refer to Churchill's 'flourishing friendship with Mr Maisky' (the Russian ambassador in London).¹⁷ However, this line of argument falters in the case of Spain. The reason for this, I believe, is not only the sentimentalism that occasionally influenced Churchill's outlook, but also perhaps a matter of political strategy: Churchill may have viewed Spain as a theatre not of primary but nonetheless real importance, where he could avoid direct confrontation with his party colleagues and adopt more moderate positions than those he maintained in other arenas.

Whatever the case, there remains something curiously erratic in Churchill's analysis and reflections on the Spanish Civil War, especially when contrasted with the judgement, perception and intuition he would display in the period that followed, when Spain became, without doubt, a key element of British foreign policy during the Second World War, with Churchill at the helm.

The Spanish Civil War had a polarizing effect on British politics. Labour inclined towards the Republicans, while the Conservatives were far more divided.¹⁸ For the latter, Franco could mean – at least initially – a return to political moderation, perhaps even a restored monarchy capable of restoring order, a significant feat in a turbulent Europe. Little was known in 1936 about the upcoming regime, which would last for decades, only that it emerged as a strange mix between a nineteenth-century *pronunciamento* and a fascist *coup d'état*.¹⁹ Moreover, the Abdication Crisis would shake British politics to the point where the only possible course of action on Spain was maintaining the status quo.

¹⁶ On this period in Churchill's political career, see Martin Gilbert, *Winston Churchill: The Wilderness Years* (London, 2004). It was precisely at this juncture when, visiting Majorca, he met for the first time Captain Alan Hillgarth, then British honorary vice-consul of the island. Hillgarth was to become a long-time friend and a conspicuous source of information for Churchill, both during the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. See Josep Massot i Muntaner, *El cònsol Alan Hillgarth i les Illes Balears, 1936–1939* (Montserrat, 1995).

¹⁷ Jenkins, *Churchill*, p. 493.

¹⁸ Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War*, pp. 87–91.

¹⁹ Ismael Saz Campos, *Fascismo y franquismo* (Valencia, 2004).

Behind the many factors that shaped the Conservative leaders' views on the conflict, fear of the expansion of Communism coexisted with a growing mistrust of fascism and a lingering sympathy for the old monarchical regime in Spain. In the Foreign Office, calculated realism led policymakers to conclude that non-intervention would best minimize the risks on the Peninsula. Churchill on his part was far from indifferent to the Spanish Civil War, which he viewed through a staunchly anti-communist lens. For him, communism was not just an ideological adversary, but a long-standing and corrosive threat – the ultimate evil, now a permanent feature of the post-1917 world. His animosity towards Bolshevism predated the rise of fascism, grounded in both ideological conviction and strategic foresight. In his postwar writings, Churchill even went so far as to claim that the most effective action at the end of the Great War would have been for Marshal Haig's troops to press on into Russia and eradicate Communism at its source.²⁰

Churchill had never shown sympathy for the Spanish Second Republic that had been established in 1931. He saw it as a regime influenced, if not directed, by Moscow – one that had failed to establish a stable or inclusive democratic order, instead presiding over escalating political polarization and social unrest. In his view, the republic's final months before the outbreak of the Civil War were marked by intensifying conflict and radicalization, which he interpreted as symptoms of international communist subversion at its purest. While he did not see such a model as an imminent threat to Britain itself, he believed it posed serious risks to the stability of other European countries.

As he would later acknowledge, Churchill initially sympathized with the Nationalists. According to an account of a conversation held with Churchill by the Duke of Alba during the Second World War, Churchill was still at that time clearly expressing his preference for the rebels in the Spanish Civil War: 'Had I been Spanish, I would have been a nationalist, because you defend all that is sound in Spain; I distanced myself from you when I saw that, in my view, you leaned too much towards Germany.'²¹ However, as the conflict progressed and it became increasingly clear that the rebellion was receiving both material and ideological support from Hitler and Mussolini, he began to distance himself from the new regime. Franco's alignment with the Axis made continued support impossible, and Churchill's instinctive caution regarding authoritarian fascism took precedence.

At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Britain and France adopted a policy of non-intervention, which itself reflected the Spanish Republic's lack of international prestige.²² For once, the British government – more preoccupied with its own internal tensions – and Churchill himself followed the same logic: it seemed suicidal to interfere in a conflict where any mistake could have endangered vital imperial interests such as Gibraltar or the control of the Straits. For most British politicians, non-intervention was a way to contain the potential internationalization of the conflict and sprang from an intrinsic mistrust of the republic's radical trajectory. Non-intervention was a means to contain communism, and, to a lesser degree, fascism and Nazism. The alternatives – supporting the legitimate government or throwing full support behind the rebels – were equally unappealing.

²⁰ Clifford Kinvig, *Churchill's Crusade: The British Invasion of Russia, 1918–1920* (London, 2006); R. Quinault, 'Churchill and Russia', *War & Society*, 9/1 (1991), pp. 99–120.

²¹ Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive (MAEC), R2198-33: Alba to Lequerica (Spanish Foreign Affairs Minister), 30 November 1944. Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive (MAEC), R2198-33. The precise date of the conversation is not stated, but it is reported by the Duke of Alba himself in a letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, José Félix de Lequerica, within a lengthy report on Anglo-Spanish relations sent on 30 November 1944.

²² Moradiellos, *Quo Vadis, Hispania?*, pp. 81–97.

For Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, and later for Neville Chamberlain and the appeasement-minded Lord Halifax, the Spanish conflict was a distant and obscure affair in which Britain had nothing to gain and much to lose. As Enrique Moradiellos points out, the British government hoped for, and expected, a short conflict that would not fundamentally alter the balance of power on the Iberian Peninsula.²³ At the same time, it hoped for a war that would contain the revolutionary surge of a government on an unmistakably radical path – what Churchill himself described as a ‘Kerensky phase’.²⁴ Britain believed that its economic influence could moderate a Spain drifting too close to Italy and Germany. Ultimately, this was merely a continuation of the appeasement policy that characterized Britain in the 1930s. In the short term, one of the Foreign Office’s main goals was to prevent the French Popular Front government from aiding the Spanish Republicans. By limiting the international scope of the conflict, Britain also hoped to contain the support Germany and Italy provided to the Nationalists.

Throughout much of the Spanish Civil War, Churchill seemed to accept this approach.²⁵ In his own internal deliberations and political priorities, it was the Churchill of 1918 who prevailed – the Churchill whose greatest fear was the spread of communism throughout Europe. Nevertheless, it is relevant to ask why a politician who, though no longer at the forefront of British leadership, still retained influence in parliament – and whose primary concern at this time was denouncing fascist aggression – ultimately chose to align himself with his government’s cautious stance on Spain, instead of opposing it as he did in other foreign policy matters. The reasons for Churchill’s stance on the conflict can only be partially reconstructed, but several factors appear to have shaped his response. Churchill even refused to shake hands with the new Republican ambassador in London, Francisco de Azcárate, muttering ‘blood, blood’ as he left the meeting.²⁶

First and foremost was Churchill’s complex and deeply personal relationship with Spain. While his aristocratic idealization of the country did not blind him to the risks posed by the Nationalist rebellion, his aversion to communism was even greater. From the outset, both Italy and, more discreetly, Germany provided support to the insurgents. Churchill was fully aware of this, but his hostility to Bolshevism, combined with his romanticized vision of Spain, ultimately tipped the balance in shaping his initial judgement. This convergence of historical affection and ideological fear underlay what might be described as a form of quixotic or chimerical thinking – a recurrent tendency in Churchill’s career for sentiment and imagination to override cold calculation. For Churchill, the Spanish Civil War was not merely a political catastrophe, but a profoundly human tragedy. In his eyes, it represented the senseless disintegration of a great European nation, one torn apart above all by the forces of communist subversion. This perception helps explain his early hope for rapid reconciliation among Spaniards, and for Spain’s return to peace and its rightful place within European political life.²⁷

²³ Moradiellos, *Neutralidad benévola*, pp. 169–88.

²⁴ Winston Churchill, ‘The Spanish tragedy’, originally published on 10 August 1936 and featured in Churchill, *Step by Step*, pp. 50–3.

²⁵ Moradiellos, *Quo Vadis, Hispania?*, p. 99.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

²⁷ This was the tone in Churchill’s already mentioned ‘The Spanish tragedy’, in which he toyed with the idea of supporting the rebels. He clearly felt personally involved and emotionally attached to the conflict. In this case, such involvement led to a complete demonization of the Republic. This is reflected, for instance, in the article ‘An object lesson from Spain’, originally published on 2 October 1936 and featured in Churchill, *Step by Step*, p. 66–9. See also Moradiellos, *El reñidero de Europa*, p. 106.

Churchill approached the Spanish Civil War with the same mixture of emotional engagement and strategic calculation that characterized many of his major interventions in public life – from Gallipoli to postwar European reconstruction. In each case, he acted out of a sense of personal involvement in the great questions at stake. In the case of Spain, this attachment led him – at least in the early stages – to a moral and political repudiation of the Republican side, one that arguably exceeded the limits of rational analysis.

As in other episodes of his career, this undercurrent – part instinct, part emotion – momentarily overrode the rational analysis for which he was otherwise known. The same psychological impulse would soon reappear in his unorthodox stance during the Abdication Crisis, when personal loyalty and a sense of historical drama coloured his judgement in ways that surprised many of his contemporaries.

Churchill was a shrewd political operator, and it is reasonable to suspect that his position on the war also aimed to maintain party and governmental harmony. The breach between them was already deep, and widening it further would have been politically unwise. The Spanish Civil War offered him an opportunity to make his affinity with the government visible through several articles published in the press at the time. In reality, Churchill and the British government essentially agreed on Spain, though perhaps not for identical reasons. Once these views were accepted at government level, it became extremely difficult to alter the initial policy of non-intervention. After 1937, this became even more the case, as the Nazi machine accelerated in Central Europe. In March 1938, the Francoist forces' Aragon offensive coincided with Nazi Germany's *Anschluss* of Austria. Just a few months later, in September 1938, while the Battle of the Ebro raged in Spain, Hitler imposed his will at Munich, reducing Czechoslovakia to an empty shell awaiting its final destruction. Only weeks after the fall of Barcelona to Franco, Prague fell into Hitler's hands.

Both these conflicts – the European one heralding a global conflagration, and the Spanish one marking the collapse of another country into the hands of a single ruler – were paradigms of this difficult moment in European history. In balancing dangers, Churchill – who was gradually regaining attention in Westminster, and had denounced, even from political isolation, the tragedy of Munich's 'peace' – saw his 'lesser-evil' view of the Spanish conflict increasingly vindicated. A Spain governed by Franco would remain prostrate, absorbed in its own internal affairs, and would display a degree of ingratitude towards its German and Italian supporters that would be both extensive and salutary. This remained Churchill's position as late as April 1937.²⁸

But at the end of the Civil War in 1939, Franco's regime gave ample reason for concern. The streets of Madrid were filled with Roman salutes and the militant hymns of an emboldened Falange, suggesting the possible consolidation of a totalitarian system aligned with the Axis powers. Yet, there were also grounds for cautious optimism. Beyond the regime's theatrical trappings, it retained deeply rooted Catholic and traditionalist elements, and, once military victory was secured, the Count of Jordana, Spain's Foreign Minister, was quick to issue diplomatic assurances of Spain's peaceful intentions.²⁹ Within months, both Franco and, more crucially, Churchill would become protagonists in another, even more destructive, conflict.

²⁸ Winston Churchill, 'Can the powers bring Peace to Spain?', originally published on 2 April 1937 and featured in Churchill, *Step by Step*, pp. 118–21.

²⁹ Tusell, *Franco, España y la Segunda Guerra Mundial*, pp. 21–3.

Sancho unleashed: Churchill, Spain and the Second World War

With the outbreak of the Second World War unfolded the most catastrophic conflict in human history. Churchill's own role in its trajectory was decisive. Following the failure of the British campaign in Norway and the collapse of France in May 1940, Churchill rose to the premiership and assumed leadership at a moment when Britain stood alone against Hitler's war machine. It was not good news for Franco's regime. In the early stages of the war, Spanish political circles were already expressing concern about the growing prestige of Winston Churchill. The Duke of Alba, Spain's ambassador in London – still bound to the future prime minister by both family ties and a sense of aristocratic zeal – portrayed Churchill's rise in the darkest possible light:

The conflict is gradually narrowing down to a struggle between the British Achilles and the German Hector, though my comparison cannot be extended to the Polish Patroclus (...).

Another politician for whom we cannot feel any sympathy, yet whose growing prestige must be acknowledged, is Winston Churchill – the very prototype of what should be understood by the word 'war-monger'. (...) At this point, there are still some who hope that a remedy for the conflict might yet be found, though unfortunately there are many more who foresee only a long and bloody struggle.³⁰

Securing Spanish neutrality quickly became a key objective of British wartime diplomacy – initially under Neville Chamberlain and, with greater urgency, under Churchill, as Britain's position deteriorated. The concern was not unwarranted. Although ideologically more aligned with Italian Fascism than with German Nazism, Spain had begun to mirror Mussolini's posture. As Italy moved from neutrality to intervention, Franco abandoned his own declaration of neutrality and adopted the term 'non-belligerence', widely interpreted in London as a precursor to active involvement on the Axis side.³¹

Spanish belligerence would have proved disastrous for Britain. Any Spanish participation in the war on the side of the Axis would have jeopardized the British position in the Mediterranean, endangered the security of Gibraltar and rendered the challenging campaigns in North Africa and Greece effectively unfeasible. The British response was to develop a diplomatic strategy both urgent and ambitious, one grounded in Churchill's understanding of the internal composition and instincts of Franco's regime. A key element was the appointment of a figure of weight and experience as ambassador to Madrid. The choice fell on Sir Samuel Hoare – known for his rivalry with Churchill and his association with the politics of appeasement – who, sidelined at home, was now tasked with a clearly defined mission: to prevent Spain's entry into the war.³² For the period in which Britain confronted the Axis almost alone, from mid-1940 to late 1941, this became one of the Foreign Office's top priorities. A testament to Churchill's political and intellectual stature during the Second World War is the equanimity with which he managed his relationship with, and assessment of, Hoare's work in Spain. While Anthony Eden frequently conveyed

³⁰ MAEC, R1083-13: Telegram from the Duke of Alba to Colonel Juan Beigbeder, Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 9 October 1939.

³¹ Tusell, *Franco, España y la Segunda Guerra Mundial*, pp. 203–331; Victor Morales Lezcano, 'Las causas de la no-belligerancia española reconsideradas', *Revista de Estudios Internacionales*, 5/3, pp. 609–31; Victor Morales Lezcano, *Historia de la no belligerancia española durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial* (Gran Canaria, 1995).

³² See Martin Gilbert, *The Wilderness Years*, p. 95; and Alpert, 'Las relaciones anglo-hispanas en el primer semestre de la "guerra caliente"'. Hoare's subsequent memoirs can partly be seen as an act of atonement in order to salvage his political career: Hoare, *Ambassador on Special Mission*.

to the prime minister his exasperation with the ambassador in Madrid, Churchill – despite a certain personal animosity towards Hoare – was capable of recognizing the merits of his performance as ambassador. Undoubtedly, he was also influenced in this regard by his long-standing acquaintance Alan Hillgarth, and who had become something of a convert to Hoare's cause.³³

Once installed in Madrid, Hoare deployed a familiar diplomatic strategy – combining incentive and deterrent – in his dealings with the Franco regime.³⁴ On the one hand, he offered the prospect of post-war rewards, such as a possible expansion of the Spanish protectorate in North Africa at the expense of France. On the other hand, he relied on Britain's maritime supremacy to exert pressure by controlling the supply of vital resources – particularly oil – upon which Spain was almost entirely dependent.³⁵

Spanish diplomatic representation in London also played a key role in maintaining this precarious equilibrium. Since the end of the Spanish Civil War, Francoist Spain had been represented in London by the aforementioned Duke of Alba, an experienced and well-connected diplomat.³⁶ The duke, the most prominent member of the Spanish aristocracy – and, quite significantly, also the 10th Duke of Berwick – was an old acquaintance of Churchill and proved instrumental in fostering a working relationship with the British government. He used his extensive personal network to moderate British policy towards Spain, pressing for an approach that favoured neutrality while avoiding open confrontation. Following Churchill's appointment as prime minister, a notable rapport developed between the two – rooted less in political alignment than in shared strategic interest. Both recognized that the overriding objective was to keep Spain out of the war.

Meanwhile Spain's relations with the United States remained tepid at best.³⁷ Through careful coordination, Churchill gradually drew President Roosevelt into a shared approach, aligning American policy more closely with British strategic needs. As part of this process, British efforts helped clear the path towards the negotiation of a commercial agreement between Spain and the United States. This was a diplomatic success of considerable significance: it enabled Madrid to secure access to critical oil supplies, while binding the Spanish economy – at least partially – to Western-controlled logistical networks.

Churchill's personal engagement in this effort was substantial. He recognized not only the importance of maintaining Spain's neutrality, but also the delicacy of Madrid's internal balance of forces. The ultimate decision on whether or not to enter the war would, he believed, rest not with the Falangist ideologues but with the general staff of the Spanish army – men whose experiences in the recently concluded civil war had left them wary of renewed large-scale conflict. Anticipating a worst-case scenario, Britain orchestrated a vast and discreet programme of payments directed at senior

³³ See, in this regard, for example, the exchange of correspondence between Churchill and Eden in August 1943, following Churchill's proposal to the Foreign Secretary that the Order of the Bath be conferred upon the ambassador in Madrid. The National Archives, London (hereafter: TNA), PREM 4/21/2A: Anthony Eden to Winston Churchill, 18 August 1943. In relation to Hillgarth's conversion to Hoare's cause, see John Colville, *A la sombra de Churchill: Diarios de Downing Street, 1939–1955* (Barcelona, 2007), p. 430.

³⁴ Denis Smyth, *Diplomacy and Strategy of Survival: British Policy and Franco Spain, 1940–1941* (Cambridge, 1986); and Leitz, 'More Carrot than Stick', pp. 246–73. See also Juan José Díaz Benítez, 'British military planning on Spain, 1940–1944', *War in History*, 31/1 (2024), pp. 63–81.

³⁵ Robert W. Matson, 'Neutrality and navicerts: Britain, the United States, and economic warfare, 1939–1940', *The Journal of American History*, 82/2 (1995), pp. 813–14.

³⁶ Alejandro Sánchez, 'La misión diplomática del XVII Duque de Alba en Londres (1937–1945)', *Historia Contemporánea*, 56 (2018), pp. 535–67. The most recent book on the Duke is Enrique García Hernán, *Jacobo: El Duque de Alba y la España de su tiempo* (Barcelona, 2023).

³⁷ Sáenz-Francés, *Entre la antorcha y la esvástica*, pp. 199–233.

Spanish officers. The aim was clear: to strengthen existing reservations within the military hierarchy and further undermine any residual appetite for armed intervention on behalf of the Axis.³⁸ Churchill was an enthusiast of the scheme.

Although Spain's eventual abstention from direct involvement in the war owed much to Allied efforts, it was also the product of Franco's own strategic calculations. Unlike Mussolini, the Spanish leader was not driven by ideological fervour or geopolitical ambition. His initial inclination towards the Axis was largely shaped by a long-standing hostility towards France and Britain, rooted in perceptions of nineteenth-century interference and diplomatic obstruction. In the immediate aftermath of France's collapse in the summer of 1940, Franco's principal objective was to position Spain advantageously for a settlement that, he assumed, would shortly follow a German victory. But when it became apparent that Hitler's military power far exceeded anything previously imagined – able to neutralize what had been considered the strongest army in Europe in a matter of weeks – Madrid's calculus shifted. From that point onward, it was the fear of a total Allied defeat, rather than any enthusiasm for German hegemony, that most strongly influenced Franco's posture.³⁹

Moreover, Franco was acutely aware of where true power resided. While German arms had demonstrated their effectiveness on land, maritime dominance remained firmly in British hands. Spain's dependence on British-controlled shipping lanes meant that any hope of sustaining the national economy in wartime conditions required at least a functional relationship with London.⁴⁰ Ultimately, Franco was a military man, trained to recognize when the arithmetic of force did not favour engagement. Confronted with these realities, Franco reverted to a strategy rooted in political survival. The cards he chose to play were those of self-preservation – his own, and that of a regime riven with competing factions: proud but conservative generals, unpredictable Falangists, intransigent Carlists and monarchist plotters. In this unstable domestic setting, diplomatic caution prevailed. Even while pursuing a rhetoric of ideological affinity with the Axis, Franco ensured that channels of communication with the Allies remained open. Yet, the regime also erred in its reading of global dynamics, particularly with regard to the emerging role of the United States, whose future influence in the war – and in the post-war European order – was gravely underestimated in Madrid.

Nevertheless, the diplomatic architecture painstakingly constructed to preserve Spanish neutrality was not without its moments of tension and miscalculation. During Britain's most vulnerable phase of the war – the latter months of 1940 – the Spanish press did little to disguise its sympathies, enthusiastically celebrating the Luftwaffe's devastating Blitz on London.⁴¹ For many observers, this period marked

³⁸ See Ángel Viñas, *Sobornos: De cómo Churchill y March compraron a los generales de Franco*, for a detailed account of the alleged covert funding and bribery of Francoist generals orchestrated by Britain during the early years of the Second World War. See also Denis Smyth, 'Les chevaliers de Saint-George: la Grande-Bretagne et la corruption des généraux espagnols (1940–1942)', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 162 (1992), pp. 29–54, which examines Britain's strategic use of financial incentives to counter pro-Axis sentiment among segments of the Spanish military. On this subject, see also Michael Alpert, 'Operaciones secretas inglesas en España durante la II Guerra Mundial', *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma. Serie V, Historia Contemporánea*, 15 (2002), pp. 459–72. Finally, a significant primary source is Robert A. Solborg, Report to Brigadier General Raymond E. Lee, Office of Strategic Services, Director's Office, 1942, as featured in the National Archives of the United States (NARA), Record Group M1642, Roll 100.

³⁹ For a recent and detailed assessment of the academic debate on Spain's position during the Second World War, see Emilio Sáenz-Francés San Baldomero and J. M. Sáenz Rotko, 'Diplomats in the fray: The struggle to establish the legacy of Spanish foreign policy during the Second World War', in Manuel Bragança and Peter Tame (eds), *Memories of the Second World War in Neutral Europe, 1945–2023* (London, 2023), 115–126. The controversy on this subject reflects a broader and enduring political dispute that remains salient in contemporary Spain.

⁴⁰ Sáenz-Francés, *Entre la antorcha y la esvástica*, pp. 173–99.

⁴¹ A review of the leading Spanish newspapers of the period – *Informaciones*, *ABC*, *La Vanguardia*, among others, with *Informaciones* perhaps the most effusive in its expressions of admiration for the Axis – is revealing in this regard.

the moment when Franco appeared closest to intervention, emboldened by what seemed to be the imminent defeat of Britain. Yet, this moment of danger was also one of deepening German frustration, most significantly, with the ill-fated meeting between Franco and Hitler at Hendaye in October 1940.⁴² Although Britain appeared cornered, the failure of Operation Sea Lion, the resilience of the RAF and the rhetorical energy of Churchill's speeches rallied both the domestic population and the wider Empire. In this changing context, Franco's caution began to reassert itself. The most radical elements among German envoys sought to instigate a reshuffle within the Spanish regime, promoting the so-called 'Blue Spain' of committed Falangists prepared to align fully with the Reich.⁴³

In June 1941, the German invasion of the Soviet Union opened a new phase in the war and significantly altered Spain's diplomatic posture. While publicly maintaining its stance of non-belligerence, Franco's regime authorized the formation of the *División Azul* (Blue Division), composed of volunteers who would serve on the Eastern Front alongside the Wehrmacht.⁴⁴ Though highly symbolic, this gesture allowed the regime to affirm its anti-communist credentials and offer a token of ideological solidarity with the Axis, without formally entering the war. For Churchill, the deployment of the Blue Division was undoubtedly a cause for concern, but in the broader strategic context, it was also a signal that Spain would go no further. The Blue Division, for all its visibility, became the upper limit of Francoist involvement.

With the Eastern Front now absorbing the bulk of Hitler's military resources, the strategic salience of Spain and the western Mediterranean briefly diminished. However, this was a temporary illusion. By the end of 1941, Churchill's warnings of a broader global conflict proved prescient. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December, the United States entered the war. From that point onwards, Churchill undertook a sustained effort to shape the grand strategy of the Anglo-American alliance. The first test of this strategy would come in the form of a large-scale military operation, initially codenamed 'Gymnast' and later renamed 'Torch', aimed at expelling Axis forces from North Africa and weakening their Italian ally. For Churchill, the operation represented both a tactical necessity and a strategic opportunity. Yet, its success would hinge, among other factors, on Spain's continued restraint.⁴⁵

The Allied landings in North Africa in November 1942 – Operation Torch – represented a major moment in Spain's wartime positioning and in Churchill's diplomatic management of Iberian affairs. Securing the passivity of French forces in Morocco and Algeria was a primary concern, one assumed by American diplomacy. Churchill, however, was left with the more complex and delicate task of managing Spain's potential reaction, particularly as some of the landings were to take place on the Atlantic coast of Morocco and others in Oran and Algiers – both locations requiring the Allies to navigate waters bordering Spanish territory and the Gibraltar Strait. As Sir Samuel Hoare warned, it was akin to manoeuvring between 'sharp Spanish knives'.

Indeed, the political battle waged between embassies, ambassadors and the Spanish regime itself over the alignment of Spain during the Second World War was, to a significant extent, a struggle for control over the regime's narrative and its controlled press.

⁴² Tusell, *Franco, España y la Segunda Guerra Mundial*, pp. 146–72.

⁴³ See the classic work on this topic: Klaus-Jörg Ruhl, *Franco, Falange y III Reich: España durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial* (Madrid, 1986).

⁴⁴ Xavier Moreno Juliá, *La División Azul: Sangre española en Rusia* (Barcelona, 2004).

⁴⁵ Arthur Layton Funk, *The Politics of Torch: Allied Landings and the Algiers Putsch, 1942* (Fayetteville, NC, 1974); Henri Michel, *La Segunda Guerra Mundial: Los éxitos del Eje* (Barcelona, 1990), p. 372; John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York, 2005), pp. 212–313.

The temptation to cut our lines of communication will be very great. We shall appear to have put our neck between two Spanish knives, and Spanish knives are traditionally treacherous. The Germans will be on General Franco's back, dinning into his ears: 'Now is your time. You can cut the Allied threat, destroy the naval and air bases at Gibraltar and win a dazzling reward for your country in North Africa.' Let no one underate the power of this temptation, or think that because nine Spaniards out of ten do not want war, General Franco might not risk it for the big stakes that in these circumstances it might offer him.⁴⁶

In this context, Churchill's handling of Spain may well be regarded as one of his finest diplomatic feats. As the extensive documentation preserved in the National Archives of the United Kingdom demonstrates, Churchill was closely attentive to every detail of the military and diplomatic planning concerning Spain on the eve of Operation Torch. In his contact with General Alexander, shortly before what would later become known as the Second Battle of El Alamein (Operation Lightfoot), the prime minister emphasized the importance of timing – and, naturally, of success – in creating a Spanish frame of mind favourable to avoiding hostility towards the landings then being prepared in North Africa:

Please consider the whole situation. (...) Our danger period begins to intensify from the 15th onwards. (...) at any time from now in, and especially after the middle of the month, we must apprehend violent pressure being put on Spain by Germany to paralyze Gibraltar, or alternatively to make Spain give Germany facilities for air attack on Gibraltar from the Balearics or Malaga or Cadiz Airfields. We are relying on the success of your operation the Spaniards during this critical period. They have always attached intense importance to the successful defence of Egypt. We do not regard 'LIGHTFOOT' as a cover for 'TORCH' (...) but as a definite element in its success. It would be unwise to jeopardise the prospect of victory in 'LIGHTFOOT' for the sake of a few days acceleration. But I hope you will realize how precious even these few days may be to us. Now that you have the whole picture before you, I leave the decision entirely in your hands.⁴⁷

A significant part of Churchill's effort was directed towards making President Roosevelt, and the American leadership more broadly, aware of the geopolitical implications that a hostile Spanish attitude would have – not only for the success of the operation itself but also for the maintenance of the crucial base at Gibraltar.⁴⁸ His instincts were once again accurate: the Caudillo would not obstruct the landings, nor would he allow German forces to exploit Spanish territory to retaliate.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, the situation remained volatile.

The Axis powers, fully aware of the implications of Torch, exerted renewed pressure on Franco to offer support. Berlin demanded the use of airfields in southern Spain for the Luftwaffe and dusted off strategic maps drawn up in 1940 that envisaged Spanish participation in the defence of the Reich's southern flank. That Madrid resisted these pressures was due in no small measure to Churchill's careful statecraft,

⁴⁶ TNA, FO 371/31289: Note by Sir Samuel Hoare on certain political implications of the 'Torch' plan, 29 August 1942.

⁴⁷ TNA, PREM 3/438A: Churchill to Alexander (Draft), 30 September 1942. See also TNA, PREM3-438A: Churchill to Alexander, 20 September 1942.

⁴⁸ In this regard, it is noteworthy how Churchill managed the American desire that, in the messages to be delivered to the Spanish government at the time of the landings, the United States' leading role in the operation should be emphasized over the British one. Churchill exchanged a series of revealing telegrams on the matter with Alexander Cadogan. See, for instance, the following exchanges in TNA, PREM 3/438A: Churchill to Roosevelt, 24 October 1942; Roosevelt to Churchill, 27 October 1942; Cadogan to Churchill, 20 October 1942; Churchill to Cadogan, 30 November 1942.

⁴⁹ Layton Funk, *The Politics of Torch*, p. 95.

which combined subtle threats with assurances. Spain's foreign ministry, now under the leadership of the Count of Jordana – a seasoned diplomat and long-time acquaintance of the British Foreign Office – played a central role in ensuring that the country remained inert during those critical days.⁵⁰ Franco's government not only refrained from interfering with the landings but also signalled a willingness to explore a closer diplomatic understanding with London. This period marked a qualitative shift: while Spain continued to publicly posture in favour of the Axis cause, its internal and foreign policy behaviour tilted increasingly towards disengagement. Simultaneously, Spain's relationship with the Axis – by then strained by a floundering Italy and an increasingly overextended Germany – entered one of its most precarious and mistrustful phases of the entire war.⁵¹

Both globally and from the Spanish perspective, 1943 constituted a decisive turning point in the Second World War. Until the summer of that year, Franco and his regime operated under the illusion that the Allies' apparent gratitude for Spain's cooperation during Operation Torch would suffice to insulate the country from further demands. Churchill, for his part, was content to maintain this fiction temporarily, aware that pressing Spain too forcefully while operations in North Africa remained ongoing could prove counterproductive. Yet, as the military tide continued to shift, particularly following the successful Anglo-American campaign in Tunisia, Allied patience began to wane.

In July, Operation Husky – the invasion of Sicily – ushered in a new phase. The fall of Mussolini only days later exposed the vulnerability of the Axis camp and further emboldened those within Allied councils who had long advocated a more assertive stance towards Franco's regime. With North Africa effectively pacified and Italy sliding towards collapse, many voices in both Washington and London concluded that the time had come to hold Spain to account for its ambiguous wartime conduct.⁵²

From August 1943 onwards, Allied pressure on Madrid intensified. Despite the prior improvement in bilateral relations and Franco's increasingly conciliatory posture towards both Britain and the United States, several unresolved issues continued to generate friction. Among the chief concerns was Spain's unilateral occupation of Tangier at the outbreak of the war, in breach of its international status. Equally troubling were the tolerated presence of German espionage networks across Spanish territory and the deployment of thousands of Spanish volunteers on the Eastern Front alongside the Wehrmacht, which undermined Madrid's claim of neutrality. The Spanish press remained openly sympathetic to the Axis, while large-scale exports of wolfram to Germany supplied a vital resource for the Nazi war economy. By late 1943, Allied leaders concluded that only sustained economic pressure could curb this trade.⁵³

Churchill, always more circumspect, held firm in his belief that excessive pressure on Franco could prove dangerously destabilizing. He remained sceptical of any policy that might recreate the conditions of 1936 or provoke a premature collapse of the Spanish regime, which could in turn jeopardize Allied strategic interests. While he held no illusions about Franco's political character or authoritarian methods, Churchill's overriding concern remained geopolitical stability. The maintenance of

⁵⁰ Rafael Gómez Jordana, *Milicia y diplomacia: Los diarios del Conde Jordana, 1936–1944* (Burgos, 2002).

⁵¹ Sáenz-Francés, *Entre la antorcha y la esvástica*, pp. 709–862.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 821.

⁵³ Tusell, *Franco, España y la Segunda Guerra Mundial*, pp. 435–537; Sáenz-Francés, *Entre la antorcha y la esvástica*, pp. 820–62; and Alexander Cadogan, *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, O.M., 1938–1945*, ed. David Dilks (London, 1971), p. 622.

British influence in the western Mediterranean and the preservation of Spain's non-belligerence took precedence over ideological posturing.

The diplomatic hierarchy among the Allies had, by late 1943, undergone a marked transformation. While Britain had led policy towards Spain in the early war years, by the end of that year, it was clear that the United States had assumed a dominant role. Bolstered by its growing economic and military superiority, Washington now dictated the tempo and tone of Allied diplomacy. The State Department, more ideologically driven and less tolerant of Franco's authoritarianism than Whitehall, was the first to articulate a new, more assertive approach to Spain. Ambassador Carlton Hayes in Madrid, though initially reluctant, ultimately fell into line with this shift.⁵⁴

Churchill understood that the emerging post-war world would be shaped not by Britain, but by American power. Having built his political career on the defence and maintenance of the British Empire, he now recognized that although Britain might win the war, it would not lead the peace. The baton of global leadership would pass to the United States. It was therefore essential, in Churchill's view, to maintain a durable Anglo-American alliance capable of confronting the looming geopolitical challenge posed by Stalin's Soviet Union.⁵⁵ It was in this context that a new informal diplomatic triangle emerged. Hoare in Madrid, Lord Halifax in Washington and Churchill himself, through his privileged relationship with Roosevelt, coordinated efforts to moderate the US stance towards Spain. Although the three men differed in tone and temperament, they shared a common objective: to restrain the more maximalist tendencies within the Roosevelt administration and to steer Allied policy towards more attainable goals – chiefly, to persuade Franco to sever his residual loyalty to the Axis without destabilizing his regime.⁵⁶ In any case, the final outcome was the imposition of the American position.

The final months of 1943 and the opening months of 1944 proved particularly difficult for Franco's government. The regime came under mounting Allied pressure to take concrete steps towards genuine neutrality. Franco feared that conceding to international demands would unleash domestic forces that might undermine his authority and threaten the continuity of his leadership.⁵⁷ Faced with this scenario, he opted for delay and obfuscation. The Falange, itself weakened and factionalized, was mobilized to bolster Franco's position as an indispensable arbiter between the various elements of the regime. Meanwhile, the Caudillo employed his usual tactic of strategic ambiguity. Franco resisted fully disengaging with the Axis. Only when the Allies imposed a total embargo on petrol exports to Spain – a measure that hit at the heart of the regime's already fragile economy – did Madrid begin to shift its stance. Even then, the process was gradual and fraught with resistance.⁵⁸

The decision to impose the embargo was controversial within British policymaking circles. While many Labour members within the National Government sympathized with the American call for a tougher line, Churchill feared the risks of overplaying their hand.⁵⁹ The dominant counterargument – one Churchill himself shared – was

⁵⁴ Charles R. Halstead, 'Historians in politics: Carlton J. H. Hayes as American ambassador in Spain', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 10/3 (1975), pp. 383–405; Joan Maria Thomàs, 'Catolicismo, antitotalitarismo y franquismo durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial y la inmediata postguerra', in Joan Maria Thomàs (ed.), *Estados Unidos, Alemania, Gran Bretaña, Japón y sus relaciones con España entre la Guerra y la Postguerra (1939–1953)* (Madrid, 2016), pp. 13–62.

⁵⁵ Jenkins, *Churchill*, pp. 749–751 and 778–787; and Roberts, *Churchill*, p. 780.

⁵⁶ Sáenz-Francés, *Entre la antorcha y la esvástica*, pp. 839–62.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 920–34.

⁵⁸ Joan Maria Thomàs, *La batalla del wolframio: Estados Unidos y España de Pearl Harbor a la Guerra Fría (1941–1947)* (Madrid, 2010).

⁵⁹ Moradiellos, *Franco frente a Churchill*, pp. 345–62.

rooted in comparative realism: however authoritarian Franco's regime may have been, it remained considerably less brutal than that of Stalin, with whom Britain and the United States were allied. For Churchill, the goal was never to topple the regime in Madrid, but rather to ensure that Spain remained strategically neutral and economically dependent on the Western Allies. In this respect, his measured approach prevailed, and British politics steered away from moralistic condemnation of Spain, adopting a stance of so-called 'cold reserve' that preserved the carefully maintained balance.⁶⁰

But Churchill went beyond that. On 24 May 1944, Churchill delivered a speech in the House of Commons on Spain that was almost universally regarded as overly complacent. Richard Toye discusses Churchill's speech at length in *The Roar of the Lion*, portraying it as a scarcely explicable episode within the broader context of the pragmatism that otherwise characterized the British statesman during the war. The repercussions of the speech were far-reaching, mitigated only by the overshadowing news of the Normandy landings.⁶¹ One may therefore ask whether the speech as a whole signalled a return to the Quixotic Churchill of the Spanish Civil War years, at least regarding Spain. Churchill later found it necessary to justify to an embittered Roosevelt his favourable speech on Spain with several arguments. First, he insisted on the need to distinguish between Spain and General Franco himself. He also stressed the importance of avoiding a Spain that might become hostile to British interests in the post-war period, particularly given the uncertainty that still surrounded the nature of the France that would emerge from the conflict. Above all, the prime minister articulated a broader point concerning the illegitimacy of the victors attacking every country whose political regime they found objectionable, adding that such an approach would set a dangerous precedent for the post-war international order.⁶²

Some months later, in October 1944, an exchange of letters took place between Churchill and General Franco himself. In his message, Franco emphatically highlighted his anti-communist zeal, presenting it as the principal basis for Spain's international legitimacy. Churchill, however, was far less indulgent in his reply than he had been in his May speech – indeed, he shared that speech with Stalin – fully aware that the Spanish question formed part of the wider Allied equilibrium in the final phase of the war, and also of the equilibrium within the coalition government itself. And perhaps, in his own mental calculus, there re-emerged the familiar fear of a Spain sliding once again down the path towards anarchy and communism.⁶³

In the nearly three months that elapsed between Franco's letter of October 1944 and Churchill's response of January 1945, the prime minister succeeded in restraining both the Labour wing of his government and Anthony Eden himself, who were pressing for a far more radical hardening of Britain's stance towards Spain. It again seemed, in effect, a return to the very calculations that had shaped Churchill's attitude during the Spanish Civil War. He took good care in sharing the letter with the always suspicious Stalin.⁶⁴ A few months earlier, in April 1944, Churchill had instructed the British ambassador in Moscow to emphasize to the Soviets the significance of Spain's non-intervention in the war. In a personal and secret telegram of 23 April 1944, the Prime Minister underscored that point in clear terms. The tenor of the message

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 384–420.

⁶¹ Richard Toye, *The Roar of the Lion: The Untold Story of Churchill's World War II Speeches* (Oxford, 2013), pos. 3898–3989 (Kindle).

⁶² Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge (hereafter: CAC), CHAR 20/165: Churchill to Roosevelt, 4 June 1944.

⁶³ For the full text of Churchill revealing letter to Franco (dated 20 December 1944), see CAC, CHAR 20/138B/227-232.

⁶⁴ CAC, CHAR 20/138A-B: Churchill to Stalin. 23 December 1944.

reveals the perspective from which Churchill approached the Spanish question in those months, and that the May Speech was part of a wider frame of mind:

It was a very good thing that Franco did not let the Germans through to attack Gibraltar and get across into North Africa. This has to be considered too, and you might remind our friends, as opportunity serves, that at that time we were absolutely alone in the world. So do not let us all be too spiteful about the past.⁶⁵

When the Second World War ended and a new global order emerged, Churchill took a brief rest in Hendaye, on the Franco-Spanish border. The Spanish press, ever hopeful, speculated about a possible visit to San Sebastián – a gesture that would have symbolized the recognition of Spain’s wartime conduct, though none occurred. Weeks later, at the Potsdam Conference – attended by Churchill before his party’s unexpected electoral defeat – Spain stood at a diplomatic crossroads. The Franco regime, tainted by its Axis ties and wartime sympathies, faced near-universal Allied condemnation. Churchill’s electoral defeat ended both his wartime leadership and any role in shaping Britain’s postwar policy towards Spain. The Potsdam Conference’s final protocol confirmed Spain’s exclusion: ‘The present Spanish Government, founded with the support of the Axis Powers, does not, in view of its origins, nature, record, and close association with the aggressor States, possess the qualifications necessary to justify such membership in the United Nations.’⁶⁶

The end of the Second World War coincided with Churchill’s enforced withdrawal from government. With his departure, the pragmatic management of Spanish affairs passed to others who would prove no less quixotic than Churchill himself had been during the Spanish Civil War. The new Labour government sought an independent foreign policy, aspiring to provide moral leadership over the United States and to promote regime change in Madrid – but failed in both aims.

Under Clement Attlee, Spain endured its harshest period of international isolation. Only with Churchill’s return in 1951 did Spain begin to be gradually integrated into the Western bloc. By then, however, the geopolitical landscape had shifted: Britain had become clearly secondary to the United States in shaping foreign policy. The rhythms of both Attlee’s and Churchill’s approaches to Spain were now fully set by the US State Department. Churchill thus returned to find Spain’s course already defined – and Franco well aware that his regime’s fate depended far more on Washington than London.⁶⁷

Epilogue: Winston Churchill in the Spanish imagination. memory, politics and public space

Winston Churchill Street is the most prominent road on the Rock of Gibraltar. Stretching across the Isthmus, it connects the British Overseas Territory directly with Spain – though once across the border, the name gives way to a far more prosaic and unremarkable title: Autovía CA-34. This juxtaposition of designations, grand on one side and anonymous on the other, becomes a geographical metaphor for the relationship between Britain and Spain – two nations whose histories, especially in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have often existed at a contested intersection of their respective realities, histories and national narratives.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ CAC, CHAR 20/163/27: Churchill to Moscow (Sir Archibald Clark Kerr), 23 April 1944.

⁶⁶ TNA FO 371/50947: Potsdam Conference Final Protocol, 2 August 1945.

⁶⁷ Emilio Sáenz-Francés, ‘Toppling Franco? Great Britain, Spain and the new world order, 1945–1951’, in Emilio Sáenz-Francés (ed.), *From Foes to Friends: Spain, the United States, and the United Kingdom from Civil War to Cold War* (Woodbridge, 2024).

⁶⁸ Winston Churchill, ‘The United States of Europe’, *Saturday Evening Post*, 15 February 1930.

This physical and symbolic linkage reflects a deeper truth about Churchill's role in the Spanish historical consciousness. His influence on twentieth-century Spanish history, while significant, is only dimly registered in the collective memory of Spanish society. His figure is simultaneously revered, misunderstood and ideologically filtered. Among the general public, Churchill's image tends to be shaped by familiar stereotypes – bulldog tenacity, defiant oratory and wartime leadership – while often neglecting the complexities of his engagement with Spain, from his observations of Spanish imperial decline in Cuba to his pragmatism towards Franco's regime during the Second World War.

Churchill's name appears frequently in Spanish public life, both symbolically and literally. It is affixed not only to streets in Gibraltar but also to bars, restaurants and pubs across Spain, suggesting a form of casual cultural adoption, often emptied of deeper political content. Yet, more formal commemorations exist. In 2012, for instance, the city of Barcelona dedicated a small public park to Churchill, signalling a more intentional, politically informed gesture of recognition.⁶⁹

This symbolic appropriation extends to the political realm. Churchill is one of the most frequently invoked foreign statesmen in Spanish journalism, especially in commentary aligned with liberal-conservative currents. Both political liberalism and conservatism – two traditions in Spain that remain conceptually fluid and often overlap – claim Churchill as a moral and rhetorical reference. Spanish political leaders, particularly from the centre-right, have drawn on his legacy to bolster their own narratives of leadership, democratic values and national resilience. The figure of Winston Churchill has likewise become the object of growing academic and institutional interest. In 2019, the Cervantes Institute in Manchester hosted the exhibition *The Bulldog and the Bull*, curated by Jimmy Burns Marañón, who was at the time President of the British-Spanish Society. The exhibition was subsequently transferred to Churchill College, Cambridge, and later brought to Madrid through the initiative of the Winston Churchill Institute at the Universidad Pontificia Comillas – a recently established centre devoted to the analysis of Anglo-Spanish relations.⁷⁰ It is also worth recalling that in 2011, the Regional Government of Madrid – then led by an administration openly sympathetic to the United Kingdom's Conservative Party – hosted a major exhibition focused on Churchill's relationship with Spain: *Caminando con el destino. Winston Churchill y España: 1874–1965*. The exhibition resulted in the publication of a valuable catalogue and was accompanied by the organization of an international conference solely devoted to the British statesman.⁷¹

However, recent years have seen the rise of more critical interpretations of Churchill's legacy in Spain, reflecting a broader global (and controversial) reassessment of his role in imperial and international history. These critiques often emphasize his tolerance of the Franco regime, suggesting that Churchill's wartime diplomacy contributed to the perpetuation of authoritarian rule in Spain rather than encouraging a return to republican governance. His unabashed imperialism and unapologetic nationalism are likewise cited as placing him on the more troubling side of twentieth-century memory. Such was the case, for instance, with the Spanish

⁶⁹ 'La Rambla acoge un nuevo espacio en memoria de Winston Churchill', *La Vanguardia*, 15 December 2012, <<https://www.lavanguardia.com/mon-barcelona/20121215/54356380808/nou-espai-en-memoria-de-winston-churchill.html>> [last accessed 12 May 2025].

⁷⁰ In 2022, a journal based at this university devoted a special issue to 'Winston Churchill y Europa': *Comillas Journal of International Relations*, 'Winston Churchill y Europa', 7 (2016), <<https://revistas.comillas.edu/index.php/internationalrelations/issue/view/583>> [last accessed 3 February 2026].

⁷¹ See David Sárías Rodríguez, *Caminando con el Destino: Winston Churchill y España, 1874–1965* (Madrid, 2011).

publication of Tariq Ali's biography of Churchill by one of the leading Spanish editorials, which was widely discussed in the Spanish print media.⁷²

In examining the enduring nature of Winston Churchill's political legacy, the Brexit debate emerges prominently, particularly in how his figure was perceived in Spain as an argument for both remaining in and leaving the European Union. Historian Andrew Roberts, at the time of publishing his recent Churchill biography, was quoted supporting the thesis that Churchill was a Brexiteer *avant la lettre*.⁷³ Conversely, actor Gary Oldman, interviewed on the eve of *Darkest Hour*'s premiere, defended the view that Churchill would have opposed leaving the European Union.⁷⁴ These contrasting interpretations persisted throughout the contentious process of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union.⁷⁵ Boris Johnson's publication of *The Churchill Factor* in 2014 underscored the symbolic appropriation of Winston Churchill's legacy by Brexit supporters. The 2019 controversy between Johnson, then Prime Minister, and Nicholas Soames, Churchill's grandson, over Soames' opposition to Brexit garnered notable coverage in the Spanish press.⁷⁶ At times, Spanish media outlets were virtually overwhelmed by news reports or opinion pieces that deployed Churchill's figure, speeches or political actions in support of both positions. In a general analysis of the debate surrounding the road to Brexit, the referendum and the political turbulence it generated, the prevailing perception in Spain is that Churchill would have been more inclined towards moderation and restraint, and that under no circumstances would he have supported a referendum as a political response to a national debate overriding the legitimacy of Parliament. Rather than being seen as a forerunner of the partisan policies advocating for the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union – and, above all, of the politicians who embodied them – Churchill is largely perceived as a decidedly iconoclastic, yet committed, precursor of the European integration project. This is the impression conveyed by much of the media debate on Churchill and Europe during the Brexit era.

In the end, the figure of Winston Churchill in Spain occupies a paradoxical space: a political icon whose legacy is both authoritative and contested; a historical figure invoked to elevate public debate, yet also flattened by ideological simplification. His reception in Spain, shaped by admiration, ambivalence and selective memory, mirrors his evolving reputation in his own country, albeit through a different lense. In both contexts, Churchill stands as a reminder not only of individual leadership but also of the intertwined, often contradictory currents that shaped the modern histories of Britain and Spain – yet a further twist on the Churchillian contradictions between Don Quixote and Sancho.

⁷² Tariq Ali, *Winston Churchill: Sus tiempos, sus crímenes* (Madrid, 2023). See, for instance, 'Tariq Alí, autor de un libro sobre Churchill: 'Llamarlo racista es una de las críticas más suaves que se le pueden hacer'', *20 minutos*, 3 November 2023, <<https://www.20minutos.es/noticia/5186986/0/tariq-ali-autor-un-libro-sobre-churchill-llamarlo-racista-es-una-las-criticas-mas-suaves-que-se-le-pueden-hacer/>> [last accessed 5 May 2025].

⁷³ 'Winston Churchill habría hecho realidad el Brexit hace ya tiempo', *El Independiente*, 2 October 2019, <<https://www.elindependiente.com/internacional/2019/10/02/winston-churchill-habria-hecho-realidad-el-brexit-hace-ya-tiempo/>> [last accessed 5 May 2025].

⁷⁴ 'Gary Oldman: "Churchill no habría permitido el Brexit"', *El Mundo*, 3 January 2018, <<https://www.elmundo.es/papel/cultura/2018/01/03/5a4bc206ca47412b698b4579.html>> [accessed 5 May 2025].

⁷⁵ '¿A Churchill le hubiera gustado el Brexit?', *La Vanguardia*, 31 January 2025, <<https://www.lavanguardia.com/historiayvida/historia-contemporanea/20250131/10336669/churchill-le-hubiera-gustado-brexit.html>> [last accessed 5 May 2025].

⁷⁶ 'Y Boris dio la patada al nieto de Winston Churchill', *El Mundo*, 10 September 2019, <<https://www.elmundo.es/cronica/2019/09/10/5d7622cefdddf2d5f8b4597.html>> [last accessed 5 May 2025]; 'El Brexit destruye el último mito de UK: por qué Johnson se carga al nieto de Churchill', *El Confidencial*, 7 September 2019, <https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/europa/2019-09-07/brexit-nieto-churchill-partido-conservador-ue_2214479/> [last accessed 5 May 2025].