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# THE EUROPEAN GREAT POWERS AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR, 1936–1939

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Historians now accept, contrary to the contemporary propagandist claims of Communists and Fascists, that the Spanish civil war was initially a domestic affair, and that foreign interference before the outbreak on 17 July 1936 was negligible.<sup>1</sup> The effect of foreign intervention or deliberate non-intervention after 17 July is another matter. While the ultimate consequences remain a matter of disagreement there is no disputing that it had a major impact on the course of the war. It was, for example, only through the provision of transport aircraft by Italy and especially Germany that General Franco was able to transfer Spanish Moroccan forces to southern Spain during the crucial early weeks of the conflict. And it was only as a consequence of the Soviet Union's provision of arms and aircraft, coupled with the arrival of the International Brigades, that Madrid was saved for republican Spain in November 1936 and the war prolonged for another two years.<sup>2</sup> The present essay examines the motives which led the European Great Powers to intervene or remain aloof and the impact of the war on their relations. As will be seen, the Spanish civil war, while not a direct cause of the subsequent World War, critically influenced the shaping of Great Power alignments in the years before September 1939.

## INTERVENTION AGAINST THE REPUBLIC— NAZI GERMANY AND FASCIST ITALY

The response of Germany and Italy to the failed insurrection of the Spanish military was neither spontaneous nor immediate. It was not until 25 July and foreign minister Ciano's meeting in Rome with Antonio Goicoechea, a leader of *Renovación española*, a Spanish monarchist group founded in 1932, that the decision to intervene was taken; Mussolini having previously, on 20 July, rejected a request from the Spanish rebels for aircraft.<sup>3</sup> Hitler's decision to intervene was taken almost simultaneously, in the early hours of 26 July, independently of Italy. Against the advice of his foreign and war ministries

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the *Führer* responded positively to a request from General Franco for armaments and aircraft which had been presented to him personally at Bayreuth by Joannes Bernhardt, a member of the Nazi *Auslandorganisation* and formerly director in Morocco of its economics section.<sup>4</sup>

For both Germany and Italy the limited commitment of July 1936 was to expand considerably by the end of the civil war. Throughout its duration more than 16,000 Germans helped the Nationalist forces, although the maximum at any one time was 10,000. These forces included the Condor Legion which consisted of 5,000 tank and air personnel. At their maximum Italian forces in Spain numbered between 40,000 and 50,000 troops including air personnel. German casualties were very slight, amounting to no more than 300 dead. Italian losses were far heavier with around 4,000 dead and 11,000–12,000 wounded. German military hardware consisted essentially of tanks, aircraft and anti-aircraft guns plus a substantial quantity of small arms—machine guns, rifles and revolvers—transported via Portugal. Italy's contribution in this sphere was even more impressive including aircraft, tanks, motor vehicles, artillery and small arms.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that the total cost of Italian war was *matériel* amounted to 6 billion lire (£64 million) while for Germany the cost is variously estimated at between 412 million and 540 million Reichmarks (£35 million and £46 million).<sup>6</sup>

The expenditure of such large resources was clearly a measure of the determination of the two dictator powers to ensure the victory of the Nationalist forces in Spain despite the risks of a further deterioration in their relations with Britain and France and even of a wider European conflagration. In the initial stages of the civil war ideological considerations figured prominently both in Rome and Berlin and continued to exert an influence throughout the conflict. Contrary to the views of certain historians, Italian claims that they were fighting against the forces of Communism in Spain were not mere façade or disguise but were genuinely held.<sup>7</sup> Nor were Fascists fears of a red revolution in Spain and its possible effects misplaced, in view of the increasing popularization of the Spanish Republican defence including the establishment of revolutionary committees. In this connection the Italian government was not inclined to make a distinction between libertarian anarchists in Spain, of whom there were many, and Soviet oriented Communists of whom there were few in July and August 1936. A victory for the left in Spain held considerable dangers elsewhere since it might encourage revolutionaries in France and all of western Europe including Italy. As Mussolini told his wife, Rachele: "Bolshevism in Spain would mean Bolshevism in France, Bolshevism at Italy's back, and danger of Bolshevism of Europe." The *Duce* and Ciano continued throughout the civil war to regard their intervention in Spain as safeguarding Fascism in Italy. However, the ideological motive remained essentially a negative one. With the possible exception of the Farinacci mission to Spain early in 1937 there was no serious or sustained attempt to convert Franco's regime to Fascism during the civil war.<sup>8</sup>

The ideological motive was also prominent in Germany's decision to intervene in Spain, and also, as in the Italian case, essentially a negative one.



Despite the involvement of the German ambassador, General Wilhelm Faupel, with the one genuine Spanish Fascist movement, the *Falange*, there was no intention of seeking to establish a National Socialist regime in Spain; an exercise which Hitler himself believed would be “totally impossible not to mention superfluous and absurd.”<sup>9</sup> What mattered was the dangerous contagion of Bolshevism. Hitler, referring to his decision of 26 July 1936, five years afterwards, explained that “if there had not been the danger of the Red Peril’s overwhelming Europe” he would not have intervened.<sup>10</sup> The *Führer’s* memory was not at fault. Sir Robert Vansittart, the permanent under-secretary of state at the Foreign Office, visited Germany in August 1936 and found Nazi ruling circles obsessed with events in Spain and the threat of Bolshevism: “this is the constant theme of every man and woman in Berlin; indeed they can think and talk of little else. The obsession (with Communism) is in any case endemic, but Spanish events have reinforced their thesis.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, on 26 July Hitler had warned Joachim von Ribbentrop that a victory for Communism in Spain would in a short time result in the Bolshevisation of France in view of the current situation in that country; by which he probably meant the advent of the Popular Front Government of Léon Blum and their declared sympathy for the Spanish Republicans. The German foreign minister, Constantin von Neurath, was equally apprehensive about the Bolshevik contagion spreading from the Iberian Peninsula to the rest of western Europe.<sup>12</sup> Hitler, sharing the fears that arose from the civil war, also exploited them by extending conscription from one to two years and introducing the Four Year Plan.<sup>13</sup>

This ideological preoccupation was linked in German minds with strategical considerations to produce what Denis Smyth refers to as “a geo-ideological conception of the international system.”<sup>14</sup> Vansittart, for one, had no doubts but that it was the international strategical dimension of Bolshevism that concerned the Nazi leadership. They had little to fear from “an internal (Communist) recrudescence which would be ruthlessly crushed.” What they did fear was “an external convergence, that Communism will extend in Europe and round on, if not encircle, Germany.”<sup>15</sup> The Nazis had no illusions concerning their strategic position. The possibility of a further strengthening of links between France, Soviet Russia and Czechoslovakia, following on from their mutual assistance pacts of 1935 and the victory of the Popular Front in France in the elections of May 1936, was all too real. No doubt they were also alarmed by the more than doubling of Soviet Russia’s defence budget in 1936 from 6.5 billion to 14.8 billion roubles.<sup>16</sup> Apart from posing an external threat the strategic consequences of a victory for Communism in Spain would bode ill for the long term racial-imperialist ambitions of the Third Reich in eastern Europe and Soviet Russia; not least because, as Hitler himself revealed in April 1937, at a time of potential military co-operation between the French Popular Front and Soviet Russia, the establishment of a “Bolshevik state” in Spain would “constitute a land bridge for France to North Africa” which would safeguard the passage of French colonial troops to the northern frontier of France.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, a victory for the militarists in Spain would weaken Germany’s potential

adversaries, in particular France, improve the Reich's strategic defence and enhance its prospects for the conquest of *Lebensraum* in the East; whether as an end in itself or merely a staging post in a phased programme (*Stufenplan*) for world dominion.<sup>18</sup>

Both Germany and Italy recognised the strategic benefits, especially in the naval sphere, which might accrue to them as a consequence of co-operation with a grateful Nationalist Spain; benefits which would clearly be to the detriment of adversaries such as Britain and France. In the summer of 1938 the Nazi general, Walter von Reichenau, outlined them to an audience of National Socialist leaders:

A state like ours, not being in a position to acquire the necessary *points d'appui* by direct action must fill in the gaps thanks to its alliances. This we have done by means of our Italian agreement embodied in the Berlin-Rome axis, and by means of our intervention on General Franco's behalf. From the point of view of military strategy, we have got at the most vital lines both of England and France. Therein lies the paramount importance of our intervention in Spain.

Reichenau also advised that a victory for Franco in the civil war would provide the opportunity to transform Portugal into a willing satellite of the Axis and thereby secure considerable strategic benefits in the western Atlantic and western Mediterranean with dire consequences for Britain's own naval strategy. Significantly, at the time Reichenau made his speech Hitler was planning a giant battlefleet for war in the Atlantic where he needed bases.<sup>19</sup> Reichenau's observations on Portugal, although officially denied as authentic, were not isolated ones but reflected official thinking in Berlin and also Rome. Indeed, from the outset of the civil war in Spain the German and Italian governments sought to exploit Anglo-Portuguese differences over Spanish policy.<sup>20</sup>

Italy's intervention in Spain was certainly influenced by its strategic interest in the western Mediterranean. According to John Coverdale, from the outset of his regime in 1922 Mussolini thought of Spain primarily in terms of strengthening Italy's position *vis-à-vis* France by denying the latter the possibility of transporting troops across Spain from its north African empire, and that he might also have hoped to obtain bases in the Balearic Islands which intersected the routes between north Africa and France's Mediterranean ports.<sup>21</sup> In taking his decision to intervene Mussolini was aware that a Republican victory obtained with French support implied closer Franco-Spanish relations and the loss of Italian influence in the western Mediterranean. The reverse might be the case if the Spanish military succeeded in their rebellion. To ensure this outcome Ciano insisted in his conversation with Goicoechea of 25 July that in return for Italian support the rebels would adhere to the terms of the 1934 agreement, signed by Mussolini and Spanish monarchists, which bound Spain to denounce a supposed secret Hispano-French pact.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from acquiring the general support and collaboration of a victorious rebel government, the Italians hoped to establish naval and air bases in the Balearic Islands, which would weaken both the French and British strategic



position in the western Mediterranean. Indeed, the British authorities were extremely concerned about the presence of an increasingly large number of Italian air force personnel on Majorca between August and December 1936.<sup>23</sup> It is unlikely that in pursuing strategic objectives Mussolini believed he could establish a complete Italian ascendancy in the Mediterranean basin and in the process revive the old Roman Empire, nonetheless a successful intervention in Spain would strengthen Italy's security and that of its African empire while providing some scope for the further advance of imperial ambitions.<sup>24</sup>

The initial expectation of Hitler and Mussolini that the civil war would be of short duration precluded any expectation that intervention in Spain would yield actual military benefits, as opposed to strategic gains. However, as a by-product of the extension of the conflict from a matter of weeks to a matter of years, the Axis powers were able to test their weapons and to train personnel in their use under combat conditions. Indeed, many of Hitler's future wartime military commanders were present in Spain at various times including Generals Janecke and Sperrie of the *Luftwaffe*, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, head of German Military Intelligence, General von Thomas of the future *Afrika Korps*, General Guderian and General Richtofen.<sup>25</sup> The Germans learned a number of valuable military lessons in Spain which were to be applied during the Second World War. In his address to National Socialist leaders, alluded to previously, Reichenau referred to some of these lessons which included the organisation of defence against air attacks; the superiority of the heavily armed tank as opposed to lighter models (such as the Italian Fiat Ansaldo or the German Panzer Mark I) which had proved ineffective against heavier Russian tanks in 1936 and 1937; the use of motor vehicles in war; the vital importance of spare parts, oil and fuel; and the use of boldness in the conduct of operations in a war of movement. Reichenau also recognised the significance of the civil war for the development of tactical air strikes in support of ground forces. Later, a member of the *Luftwaffe*, General Karl Dunn, was to emphasise that of all the experience gained by the Condor Legion in Spain it was "that pertaining to the methods of tactical air employment which was most significant and most far reaching in its effects."<sup>26</sup> While such lessons were indeed learned, others were missed; not least the *Luftwaffe's* assumption that high-performance and well-armed bombers in mass formation could protect themselves against enemy fighters in daylight missions. The result was the very high losses sustained by *Luftwaffe*-trained bomber crews during 1940. The Italians also failed to learn lessons from the Spanish conflict such as the inadequacies of light tanks armed only with machine guns. In 1939 Italy manufactured only 194 tanks armed with cannon.<sup>27</sup>

Connected with their military operations in Spain was the prestige of the Italian and German governments. In the summer of 1936 neither Hitler nor Mussolini required a victory in Spain as a distraction from internal complications, a consideration which certainly figured prominently in Mussolini's decision a year earlier to wage war in Ethiopia.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, having committed themselves to the cause of the Nationalists in Spain through their military and economic support and by their *de jure* recognition of Franco's administration in November 1936, it would have been difficult for the two dictators to save

GERMAN TANKS TESTED  
AGAINST RUSSIAN TANKS.

face in the event of defeat. Certainly, Italy's determination to maintain its forces in Spain until Franco's final victory, despite mounting costs and casualties, was connected to the prestige of the Fascist regime; and this was true particularly after the Italian defeat at Guadalajara in March 1937.<sup>29</sup>

While it is probably correct to regard actual military considerations as a by-product of Italian and German intervention, it is a mistake, at least in the German case, to view economic considerations in a similar light.<sup>30</sup> If Hitler's initial decision to intervene was motivated by geo-ideological considerations, it soon became clear that the war *matériel* provided from German sources would not be given *gratis* but that the Germans would exact a price in the form of Spanish raw materials in lieu of gold and foreign currency, which were in short supply on the rebels' side owing partly to the success of the Republican government in maintaining control of Spain's gold reserves. In any case the Germans preferred the compensation to be paid in this form because these materials included iron ore, copper, pyrites and sulphur which were vital to Germany's second Four Year Plan, the inception of which coincided with the initial build-up of German aid to Franco's forces. The organisation charged with the task of obtaining and shipping these materials to Germany was the HISMA (*Compãnia Hispano-Marroquí de Transportes*) trading company which worked in concert with another company called ROWAK (*Rohstoffe-und-Waren-Einkaufsgesellschaft*) which was set up simultaneously in Berlin and which performed the task of distribution within Germany itself.

By exacting such compensation the German government was able to overcome the chronic shortage of foreign currency which limited their ability to purchase essential raw materials on the open market. Also, the Germans anticipated that in the event of a Nationalist victory supplies of such materials would be continued in the event of a general European war.<sup>31</sup> In this last connection the German economic ministry acknowledged Britain's lead in Spain in terms of foreign investment and called for greater German direct investment in order to ensure continuity of supply of essential raw materials. Consequently, in 1937 and 1938 the Reich government sought to create a German owned network of enterprises to extract and acquire Spanish raw materials but the project, code-name MONTANA, was strenuously resisted by the Nationalist authorities and was only partly successful. Moreover, it alerted Franco to the danger of being drawn too closely into the German economic orbit and led him to give a more sympathetic reception to British requirements than might otherwise have been the case.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to Germany Italy made no concerted or sustained effort to advance its economic interests in Spain by exploiting Franco's dependence on Italian war *matériel*. While it is true that bilateral agreements were signed which provided for partial repayment in the form of Spanish raw materials— notably iron ore, pyrites, cocoa, olive oil, raw wool and coal—the Italians allowed postponement of repayment of a substantial proportion of Nationalist debts for the duration of the civil war. According to a leading authority on the finances of the Spanish civil war, Angel Viñas, the generosity of the Italians was “the principal way in which the Burgos government could manage to



make the international payments necessary to strengthen the war sector of its economy.” Indeed, the relatively harmonious nature of Italo-Nationalist economic and financial relations provided a stark contrast to the ruthless and opportunistic economic policies of the Third Reich in Spain. Later, the Italians lamented their generosity. On 26 August 1939 Mussolini complained to the German ambassador that his country had been “bled white” by the Spanish civil war which had made enormous inroads on Italian foreign exchange reserves, thereby greatly increasing the problem of obtaining raw materials.<sup>33</sup>

It would appear then that ideological and strategical considerations were uppermost in the minds of Hitler and Mussolini when taking their respective decisions to intervene in Spain in July 1936, and with respect to their subsequent action. Early in the civil war economic considerations acted as a further incentive for German intervention which provided the opportunity to overcome problems of supply of important raw materials for the Four Year Plan. The decision to intervene by both Germany and Italy would have been taken even if the civil war had not provided the opportunity to test new weapons and to train personnel under wartime conditions. Military considerations of this kind should be regarded as a welcome by-product of the Spanish conflagration rather than as a motivation for intervention.

#### **INTERVENTION ON BEHALF OF THE SPANISH REPUBLIC—SOVIET RUSSIA**

Unlike the German and Italian cases it is not possible as yet to pinpoint precisely when the Soviet government decided to intervene in Spain on behalf of the Spanish Republic. The initial response of the Soviets towards the outbreak of the war revealed little immediate concern. Confidence was expressed as to the capacity of the Republicans to quell the military uprising. In late July 1936 while individual Communist parties, such as those in Britain, the United States, Poland and France declared their support and solidarity for the struggle against Fascism in Spain, the Comintern remained as unmoved as its Soviet masters in Moscow.<sup>34</sup> During the first three weeks of August the Soviet response was confined to providing financial support derived from collections—in reality deductions from wages at source—amongst Soviet workers. Then, on 22 August, the Soviet government adhered to the Franco-British sponsored non-intervention agreement. By this agreement the export of arms to the Republic was prohibited on 28 August and a non-intervention committee was established in London to ensure compliance. The same day, however, the first Soviet ambassador to be accredited to a Spanish government, Marcel Rosenberg, arrived in Madrid accompanied by a Soviet military delegation headed by General Jan Berzin. A few days previously Vladimir Antonov-Ovsienko, a hero of the Russian civil war, had been appointed as Soviet consul-general in Barcelona. However, a further month elapsed before the fall of Toledo to the rebels, which left Madrid open to attack, compelled the Soviet authorities to risk a breach with the non-intervention committee by sending large scale military aid to

Republican Spain. On 7 October the Soviet representative, Samuel Cahan, warned the non-intervention committee that unless breaches of the non-intervention agreement by Germany, Italy and Portugal ceased immediately the Soviet government would “consider itself free from the obligations arising out of the (non-intervention) agreement.” That same day the first consignment of Soviet armaments probably left Odessa on board the Soviet vessel *Komsomol* which arrived at Cartagena, Republican Spain’s main naval base, on 15 October. The Soviet naval *attaché*, Kuznetsov, was instructed officially to meet the vessel on arrival, and the same day an exchange of telegrams took place and was reported in *Izvestia*.<sup>35</sup>

From October 1936 until the summer of 1938 Soviet military aid to the Republicans was extensive, and included aircraft, tanks, armoured cars, artillery pieces, lorries, machine guns, rifles and mortars. The Soviets also provided most of the Spanish government’s imports of oil. During the civil war between 2,000 and 3,000 Russians were present in Spain with 700 as the maximum at any one time. Soviet personnel, with the exception of some pilots and tank crews, did not engage directly in combat; rather they acted in the capacity of specialist advisors and included amongst their number agents of the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, who were active late in 1936 and during 1937 in helping their Republican counterparts to expose and liquidate anarchist and Trotskyist “subversives.”<sup>36</sup> As a direct consequence of Soviet aid, and in contrast to the limited influence which Germany and Italy wielded within the political counsels of the Francoist authorities, Soviet influence on the political and military organisation of Republican Spain was profound. Increasingly, Republican policies were subordinated to directives emanating from Moscow. Moreover, while Soviet advisors were penetrating many institutions of the Spanish government the membership of the *Partido Comunista de España* (PCE) expanded rapidly. In April 1936 the PCE claimed 50,000 members, by the end of the year the party general Secretary, Jose Díaz, estimated its membership at 250,000. The increase in numbers was accompanied by a rapid extension of the PCE’s prestige and authority.<sup>37</sup> However, the change in the fortunes of the PCE, as a direct consequence of Soviet aid, did not presage a Soviet revolution within Republican Spain. Contrary to German and Italian expectations, the Soviet authorities had no intention of “Bolshevising” the Iberian Peninsula and western Europe. On the defensive, they too approached the conflict from a “geo-ideological” perspective, which led them to pursue collective security and, through the Comintern, a Popular Front strategy in the mid-1930s.

Prior to 1933 Soviet foreign policy, reflecting the triumph of the doctrine of “socialism in one country” over that of “world revolution,” was essentially isolationist. The only Communist state in the world, the bastion and supposed hope for further Communist advance at a distant date, the Soviet Union needed time to develop the fundamental industrial and technological capacity so essential for its security in a hostile capitalist world. From 1928 until 1933 rapid and forced industrialisation at home was accompanied by a Soviet search for security through “the exploitation of friction and antagonism within the capitalist camp;” an approach which ruled out entangling alliances.<sup>38</sup> In 1933



the advent of the Nazi regime in Germany, with its virulent anti-Communist rhetoric, its suppression of the German Communist party, its exit from the disarmament conference and League of Nations and its *rapprochement* with Poland towards the end of the year, created considerable apprehension in Moscow and encouraged the alternative foreign policy approach of collective security, which was favoured by the Soviet foreign minister, Maxim Litvinov, and the *Narkomindel* (Russian foreign ministry). To this end Soviet Russia entered the League of Nations in 1934 and in 1935 signed separate pacts with France and Czechoslovakia.<sup>39</sup>

The adoption of collective security by the Soviet government was not followed immediately by a change in direction on the part of Comintern, many of whose members remained critical of the change in Soviet policy. At its seventh and final congress during July-August 1935, however, the Comintern adopted a Popular Front strategy which involved co-operation and collaboration between Communists, Socialists (the former Social Fascists of the sixth congress), and liberal progressives.<sup>40</sup> The Popular Front was intended to facilitate and complement the policy of collective security. Unfortunately for the Soviets the very governments earmarked for collaboration in an alliance against German Fascism, namely Britain and France, viewed the Popular Front with alarm and suspicion. These apprehensions appeared to be borne out by the decisive election victories of Popular Front coalitions in Spain and France in February and May 1936 respectively and by the sit-ins and demonstrations of French factory workers in June.

This contradiction notwithstanding, Soviet leaders continued to pin their faith on collective security and the Popular Front strategy after the intervention of Germany and Italy in Spain in July 1936. They recognised that a victory for the militarists in Spain, backed by Hitler and Mussolini, would leave France, Russia's new partner, surrounded on three sides by hostile neighbours, while the collapse of the Popular Front in Madrid would have serious consequences for its French counterpart, but they faced an acute dilemma when the French Popular Front government proved reluctant to intervene. Soviet intervention was required to save France from encirclement, but any attempt to intervene would upset the delicate balance in France and jeopardise the Franco-Soviet alliance. Accordingly, in the absence of French or British intervention in Spain during August 1936 the Soviets restricted their activities to propaganda support for the Republic accompanied by demonstrations and collections in the cities of Russia. In order to keep in step with the development of Anglo-French policy the Soviets reluctantly acceded to the French proposal for a non-intervention agreement on Spain and accepted membership of the non-intervention committee. However, continued intervention by Italy, Germany and Portugal, despite adherence to the non-intervention agreement, and the uproar this created in left wing circles in Europe, including Britain and France, compelled Moscow to alter its policy during September and October to one of covert intervention in Spain combined with active participation in the work of the non-intervention committee.<sup>41</sup>

Soviet intervention helped to reinforce the Italo-German relationship, which was consolidated in the declaration of the Rome-Berlin Axis during

October 1936, and encouraged Germany to sign an anti-Comintern pact with Japan in November. Relations with France and Britain were also impaired. However, with Soviet assistance Madrid was saved from Franco's forces and the Spanish struggle prolonged. Soviet leaders still hoped to persuade the western democracies to help save the Spanish Republic and themselves from the consequences of Fascist aggression. To this end they used their increasingly vital intervention to pressure the Spanish authorities into creating a conventional Republican army in place of the anarchist and Trotskyist POUM (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*) militia system and to suppress radical social experiments within the Republican territories. In order to strengthen the Republic's military resistance, to neutralise the possibility of a *bourgeois* secession to the Spanish Fascists and to make the French and British governments more amenable the Soviet leaders were prepared to sacrifice the Spanish revolution. Indeed, at their insistence the Spanish government espoused the cause of *bourgeois* parliamentary democracy and refused to condone "any action against the property rights and legitimate interests of those foreigners in Spain who were citizens of states which did not support the rebels."<sup>42</sup>

From October 1936 until the summer of 1938 the Soviets, in their pursuit of collective security, sought in vain to use the Spanish conflagration as a means of persuading the British and French governments to forsake their appeasement of the Fascist dictators. Moscow's patient commitment to collective security during this period was not a product of illusion but of the absence of a viable alternative policy other than a return to isolationism. A *rapprochement* with Berlin, despite tentative feelers on the Soviet side, was ruled out by Hitler's continued hostility and his ambitions in central Europe.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, Japanese aggression in northern China, especially in August 1938, imposed further problems for Soviet defence in the Far East.<sup>44</sup>

The exclusion of Soviet Russia from the Munich conference signalled the collapse of the policy of collective security and a return to isolationism. It was now clear, if it had not been before, that Republican Spain could not expect a concerted Anglo-French-Soviet intervention on its behalf. As E. H. Carr notes, the Munich agreement showed that Spain had been relegated "to an insignificant place" in the preoccupations of the European powers and that "no future efforts to sustain the democratic cause in Spain could be expected from those who had so easily abandoned it elsewhere."<sup>45</sup>

The Soviet failure to win the western powers to collective security through Spain did not mean that Soviet intervention was entirely fruitless from the point of Soviet interests. As with Germany and Italy, as a by-product of her intervention Soviet Russia was able, in the words of the Spanish socialist Indalecio Prieto, to use Spain as "a real life military academy" to test some of its latest weapons and to provide battle experience for ground and air personnel. Many of the leading Soviet army commanders of the Second World War visited Spain including Marshals Zhukov, Voronov and Malinovsky, Generals Rokossovsky, Krivoshein, Meretskov, Yakushin, Koniev and Butov, and Admiral Kuznetsov, commander of the Soviet fleet throughout the Second World War. Other ex-Spanish veterans such as Antonov-Ovsëenko, Berzin, Kolzov and Goriev were not so fortunate, suffering execution or slow death



in concentration camps on their return to Russia.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, although the Soviet Union failed to obtain short term or long term economic concessions in Spain, the financial cost of its intervention was defrayed to a large extent by the deposit of Spanish gold, amounting to \$518 million, in Moscow early in 1937.<sup>47</sup>

### THE NON-INTERVENTION POWERS: BRITAIN AND FRANCE

The policy of non-intervention in the Spanish civil war was the invention of the French authorities. The British government, however, was already committed in thought and deed to non-intervention before the French made their proposal for a non-intervention agreement on 1 August 1936, and adhered strictly to the agreement throughout the 32 months of the civil war. Yet France was not entirely strict in its neutrality, while Britain chose to interpret non-intervention in politico-military terms which did not preclude economic intervention. During the civil war the French sold between 100 and 150 aircraft to the Republicans. Facilities were provided for the export of gold from the Bank of Madrid between July 1936 and March 1937 while the Soviet *Banque Commerciale pour l'Europe de Nord*, operating in Paris under French laws, was able to facilitate international payments for war *matériel* on behalf of the Spanish Republic. At various times during the war the French Pyrenean frontier was opened for the transportation of arms to Spain, notably during July and August 1936, October 1937–January 1938, March–June 1938, and January–February 1939. The largest contingent of foreign combatants in the International Brigades was composed of Frenchmen, some 10,000 in all.<sup>48</sup> In the economic sphere the British authorities deliberately sought to curry favour with the Spanish Nationalists in order to counter German influence which threatened established British economic interests in Spain, notably those of the Rio Tinto and Tharsis Sulphur and Copper companies. In November 1937 they went so far as to concede *de facto* recognition by appointing a special agent, Sir Robert Hodgson, to the Nationalist authorities and receiving the Anglophile Duke of Alba in return. The French government studiously avoided following the British example despite their own economic interests in Nationalist Spain which were, admittedly, less extensive.<sup>49</sup>

Ideological influences figured prominently in the French and British decisions to pursue non-intervention in Spain. The initial, and natural, response of the French Popular Front government was to provide military assistance to the Popular Front government in Spain. But fears of a right wing backlash in France creating further civil disorder and ideological division and possibly civil war, following the occupation of the factories in June, prompted a more cautious response, not least to preserve the social reform programme of the Popular Front as enshrined in the Matignon agreements which had brought the occupations to an end.<sup>50</sup> The French government itself was divided over allowing the export of French arms and aircraft, though not entirely along Radical-Socialist party lines. As a compromise the

government proposed the non-intervention agreement in the hope that, starved of outside assistance, the rebellion would be short-lived. For most members of the government and the Quai d'Orsay there appeared to be little alternative since it was clear within days of the Generals' revolt that Britain intended to pursue a strictly neutral policy which would leave France dangerously isolated if it intervened in the Spanish conflagration. French efforts to persuade the British to change their position, such as the visit to London of Jules Moch, assistant to the French leader, Léon Blum, on 30 July and the mission of Admiral Darlan to London on 5 August, proved unavailing despite growing evidence of Italian and German intervention in Spain.<sup>51</sup>

In order to overcome the increasing opposition to non-intervention within the Popular Front, which resulted from an increased awareness of German and Italian intervention, Yvon Delbos, the foreign minister, and his officials at the Quai d'Orsay, deemed it essential to win full backing from Britain for their non-intervention proposals. Eden, Halifax and the Foreign Office proved only too willing to support French requests for assistance. This collaboration between the two foreign ministries ensured the survival of the non-intervention policy. Without Britain's full backing it is probable that the moderates in the Popular Front, including Delbos, Edouard Daladier, the minister of war and Blum himself, would have been unable to restrain those elements which incessantly demanded French intervention on behalf of the Spanish Republic.<sup>52</sup>

In contrast to the French the ideological predilections of the British government in July and August 1936 were clearly anti-Republican and pro-insurgent. Within days of the rebellion Conservative politicians such as Sir Henry Channon and the government Chief Whip, David Margesson, were lamenting its failure while the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, was adamant that "on no account French or other" should the government enter the civil war "on the side of the Russians." The expropriation by armed workers of British companies in Republican Spain, such as the Barcelona Power Light and Traction Company, in late July and early August 1936 strengthened the anti-Republican sentiment in Whitehall. In addition, the failure of the Madrid authorities to control the extreme elements in the Spanish Popular Front and to restore law and order within their territory earned the contempt of senior Foreign Office officials, including Vansittart, his deputy Sir Alexander Cadogan, and Sir George Mounsey, the superintending assistant under-secretary of the League of Nations and Western Department which was responsible for Spanish matters. These same officials remained convinced that Soviet-Comintern influence had been active in Spain long before the revolt of 17 July. During the early weeks of the civil war, in spiritual unison with Hitler and Mussolini, they continued to fear the spread of the Bolshevik contagion to France. The only dissentient voice at the Foreign Office was Lawrence Collier, head of the Northern Department.<sup>53</sup>

The British Admiralty shared these misgivings. At various times during 1936 and 1937 senior naval officers, such as Admiral Sir Ernle Chatfield, the First Sea Lord, his successor, Sir Roger Backhouse, and Admiral Geoffrey Blake, Commander of the Home Fleet, expressed strong anti-Republican and pro-Franco sentiments. After May 1937 Alfred Duff Cooper, as First



Lord of the Admiralty, was no less sympathetic to Franco than his senior naval advisors or his predecessor, Sir Samuel Hoare. All, with Invergordon probably in mind, continued to condemn unreservedly the killing of Spanish naval officers by Republican sailors during the early weeks of the civil war despite the fact that these officers were in open revolt against the democratically elected government of Spain.<sup>54</sup> Although Eden and Vansittart were converted during 1937 to the view that the survival of Republican Spain was in Britain's best political and strategic interests the passage of time converted few others. Indeed, Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, was compelled to warn his cabinet colleagues in January 1939 that the government "should avoid showing any satisfaction at the prospect of a Franco victory."<sup>55</sup>

While there was a strong ideological antipathy towards the Spanish Republic and sympathy for Franco's cause in British ruling circles it was hardly possible for the British government to assist actively a rebellion against a legitimate and democratically elected government, particularly when such action would alienate the French and arouse the fury of the political opposition at home. British statesmen recognised that the best means of containing the Bolshevik contagion was to support Blum's non-intervention proposals, Failure to provide such support would undermine the moderate elements in the French government and make French intervention a certainty.

The French government's persistence in pursuing non-intervention in face of increasing hostility within the Popular Front cannot be explained merely in terms of their fear of civil disturbances at home and the need to keep in step with London. Blum, Delbos, Daladier and other ministers genuinely feared a general European war if intervention in Spain proceeded unchecked. Nor could this danger be discounted. When Blum referred to the possibility in a major speech at Luna Park in Paris on 6 September 1936, and urged that non-intervention was the best means of preventing such a calamity, there was little dissent, and he was able to maintain Socialist party support for the non-intervention policy.<sup>57</sup> During July and August 1936 Eden and his Foreign Office advisors, who had a horror of a European war based on ideological divisions, similarly insisted that it was essential to confine the conflict to Spain.<sup>58</sup> Like Blum they also feared that any intervention in Spain by either Britain or France might irretrievably jeopardise their efforts to reach a general European settlement, based on a new Locarno, which had been proceeding since Hitler's reoccupation of the Rhineland in March.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, especially after Chamberlain became Prime Minister in May 1937, the British government was determined not to allow the civil war to interfere with its efforts to appease both Hitler and Mussolini despite their constant breaches of non-intervention.<sup>60</sup>

Both Paris and London recognised that the civil war held serious strategic consequences. As early as 24 August 1936 the British chiefs of staff advised that in a war with a European power it would be essential for British interests that Spain should be friendly or at worst strictly neutral. A hostile Spain or the occupation of Spanish territory by a hostile power would make Britain's control of the Straits of Gibraltar and the use of Gibraltar itself as a naval and air base extremely difficult if not impossible, and would accordingly endanger

imperial communications through the Mediterranean. Similarly, the possession by a hostile power of the harbours of the Spanish Atlantic seaboard would imperil Britain's communications across the Atlantic. The chiefs emphasised that Britain's interests in the Spanish crisis were first, the maintenance of the territorial integrity of Spain and its possessions (Balearics, Morocco, Canaries and Rio de Oro); and second, to secure the benevolent neutrality of a future Spanish government in the event of Britain being engaged in any European war. They shared the Foreign Office view that the best means of securing these objectives was by promoting non-intervention. They repeated this advice in July 1938, and in the course of a major appreciation of Britain's strategic position during February 1939 they could not emphasise too strongly "the strategic need of pursuing a policy which will ensure at least the neutrality of Spain, whatever the outcome of the civil war."<sup>61</sup> The decision to exchange agents with Franco in November 1937 was due as much to the need to safeguard Britain's strategic position in the western Mediterranean as to concern for British economic interests in Spain, since his government controlled all Spanish territory in proximity to Gibraltar and the Straits.<sup>62</sup>

The French high command regarded the strategic implications of a Franco victory in co-operation with Germany and Italy as extremely serious for France. In that case the Iberian Peninsula would become a third unsympathetic if not hostile front which could only be defended at the expense of the Rhine and Alpine theatres. A Franco victory might also result in a tightening of Spain's stranglehold on the Straits of Gibraltar by means of Italian and German air and naval bases on the Spanish coast or in the Balearics or Canaries which could seriously impair the co-ordination of Franco-British naval operations in the western Mediterranean and western Atlantic. The exploitation of Spanish bases by pro-rebel forces, whether nationalist or foreign, could jeopardise troop and munition transports between France and north Africa with grave consequences for the operation of the French mobilisation plan. The dilemma was that these strategic dangers could come to pass if France intervened unsuccessfully in the civil war just as much, if not more than, if it remained neutral. In particular there was a risk of escalating the war into a major European conflict, which might have as one of its theatres the Pyrenees, the least fortified of French frontiers. Moreover, intervention might prejudice Franco's supposed resolve to remove his civil war partners once his victory was assured. At the same time, any military intervention was certain to be expensive in financial, material and human resources which would necessarily be diverted from the more acute dangers on the Rhine and Alpine frontiers. The French high command therefore favoured non-intervention, but to understand fully this preference it is important to recognise that they expected the rebels to win in Spain and that their sympathies, as General Gamelin later admitted, were always with Franco.<sup>63</sup>

For the French governments of the period intervention in Spain was considered an extremely high risk policy and both the army high command and the Quai d'Orsay counselled against such a venture. As late as March 1938, in the immediate aftermath of the *Anschluss*, during the short lived second ministry of Léon Blum, Gamelin advised against intervention on the



grounds that France had insufficient forces to risk war, while the secretary general of the Quai d'Orsay, Alexis Léger, expressed his conviction that both Italy and Germany would regard French intervention in Spain as a *casus belli*.<sup>64</sup> In view of these risks the Blum, Chautemps, and Daladier administrations, at various times between August 1936 and February 1939, used non-intervention as a cover for assisting the Republican forces in Spain, though on nothing like the same scale as Soviet aid to the Republic or Italian and German assistance to the rebels. In this way their consciences were eased to some degree and the nonintervention policy was made more palatable to the rank and file of the Popular Front.<sup>65</sup>

The British authorities were not prepared at any point during the civil war to risk a European conflagration by intervening in Spain, and especially not on the side of the Spanish Republic. Nonetheless, they recognised that despite the exchange of agents there was a clear danger that British influence in Spain might be eclipsed in the event of an Axis backed victory for Franco, which seemed increasingly likely as time went by. In order to justify this risk, which was inherent in non-intervention, the British government fell back on two superficially attractive arguments. The first was that by pursuing a politically non-partisan policy Britain would receive favourable treatment from whichever side emerged victorious because it alone among the European powers had not intervened to kill Spaniards. The second argument emphasised the financial superiority of Britain in that whoever won in Spain would have to seek British financial assistance in the task of reconstruction, particularly as it was widely believed that neither Germany nor Italy could provide such assistance.<sup>66</sup> The aftermath of the civil war was to demonstrate the emptiness of these assertions.

### THE IMPACT OF THE CIVIL WAR ON EUROPEAN GREAT POWER RELATIONS

From the ideological standpoint the outcome of the Spanish civil war represented a notable success for both Germany and Italy. Although Franco's Spain was not transformed into a Fascist state on the German or Italian model it was ardently anti-Communist, as its adherence to the anti-Comintern pact on 27 March 1939 demonstrated. The threat of the Bolshevik contagion which figured so prominently in the calculations of Mussolini and Hitler in July and August 1936 was completely eradicated. The removal of this threat alone justified Axis intervention in Spain, as Ciano, for one, recognised: "At Malaga, at Guadalajara, at Santander, we were fighting in defence of our civilisation and our Revolution."<sup>67</sup> It was particularly important that the possible spread of the Bolshevik contagion to France should be neutralised. In fact the Spanish civil war contributed to the eclipse of the Popular Front. The ideological divisions within French society, so clearly apparent in February 1934 and June 1936, were, if anything, exacerbated by the civil war and this in itself probably weakened France's resolve to resist Hitler's ambitions for European hegemony.

Aside from these unanticipated gains, the Axis powers benefited from the fact that France and Britain could no longer take for granted Spain's benevolent neutrality in any future European war, and more specifically that France would be preoccupied in making contingency plans for the defence of its Pyrenean frontier. No doubt they were relieved to find that the war had not strengthened the Franco-Soviet relationship, and they also gained from the heightened fear of Bolshevism, engendered by the Comintern's involvement in Spain, which led right wing governments in the Baltic states and eastern Europe, Poland excepted, to look to Germany for deliverance.<sup>68</sup> Otherwise, the Axis powers gained little in the way of positive strategic benefits from their involvement in the Spanish conflict. In September 1938, at the height of the Czech crisis, Franco declared Spain's neutrality in the event of war, and in late August 1939, encouraged by Portugal's Salazar, the Spanish dictator confirmed his intention to remain neutral.<sup>69</sup> Franco's declaration contributed to Mussolini's decision to remain a non-belligerent, and in September 1939 Salazar, encouraged by London, adopted a policy of benevolent neutrality towards Britain and France.<sup>70</sup> Franco also refused the Axis powers the use of the Canaries or Balearics as strategic bases. Hitler, who in January 1939 initiated his Z-Plan for the construction of a giant battlefleet, found his naval ambitions delayed by the Polish crisis and obstructed by Franco's neutrality. The only concession Franco made, in strictest secrecy, was to permit German submarines to refuel at Spanish bases while engaged in attacking British Atlantic shipping.<sup>71</sup>

The economic benefits which Germany derived from its intervention in Spain continued after the civil war, and indeed after September 1939, in so far as it was able to obtain a range of important minerals such as iron ore, copper, pyrites, wolfram, zinc, tin, mercury and lithium. At the same time, German imports of Spanish minerals during the civil war had fallen short of targets set under the Four Year Plan. Pyrites stocks, for example, were equal to only six months' consumption at the beginning of 1939. Moreover, no doubt with the experience of the Montana project in mind, Franco was to limit the amount of long term economic concessions to the Axis powers and to control strictly the operations of foreign mining concern in Spain, including British ones such as Rio Tinto.<sup>72</sup>

Despite their independent decisions to intervene in the conflict there can be few doubts that the civil war in Spain, by providing an arena in which they could co-operate on a common project, contributed significantly to the *rapprochement* between Germany and Italy which had been set in train previously by Germany's benevolent neutrality in the later stages of the Italo-Ethiopian war and by Italy's decision to adopt a passive attitude to Hitler's remilitarisation of the Rhineland. Significantly, it was after the outbreak of the war that Mussolini abandoned support for the Zionists and went over to a policy of anti-semitism.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, British efforts to improve relations with Italy after the Ethiopian *débâcle* foundered over the Spanish problem, not least because of the increasing hostility, arising from the civil war, in Franco-Italian relations. That this benefited Nazi Germany cannot be denied. However, it does not follow, as some historians claim, that Hitler deliberately limited the extent of German intervention in Spain (in particular



his refusal to send ground forces) in order to prolong the conflict and thereby keep alive the tensions engendered by it as a distraction from Nazi political and military expansion in central and eastern Europe.<sup>74</sup> Although the *Führer* told his military advisors at the Hossbach conference of 5 November 1937 that Germany was more interested in a continuation of the war with all the tensions arising from it between Italy and France in the Mediterranean, his decision to limit the scale of German support for Franco was influenced by a more vital consideration. The dispatch of a large expeditionary force to Spain would have incurred the real risk of provoking a general conflagration. Any illusions that this might not be the case must have been dispelled by Delbos' warning of 23 December 1936 that if Germany sent further troop transports, in addition to the Condor Legion, such action "would necessarily lead to war." Moreover, the dispatch of such a force carried the further risk of fulfilling the primary objective of Soviet intervention in Spain, namely the crystallising of an anti-Nazi coalition comprising themselves and the western democracies. By limiting the scale of German intervention in Spain Hitler was able to contribute towards the neutralisation of Bolshevik influence without unduly antagonising Britain and France.<sup>75</sup>

There can be little doubt that the defeat of the Spanish Republic was a painful and bitter experience for the Popular Front including the Radical Socialists as well as the Socialist and Communist parties, when they found that they could not save their Spanish comrades. Nevertheless, the adoption of non-intervention probably prevented a socio-political crisis in France. Despite occasional breaches of the non-intervention agreement by the French authorities the French right was mollified by the policy of non-intervention, especially as it appeared to benefit Franco rather than the Republicans and because it was consistent with British policy. Although sympathetic to the Spanish Republicans, when their cause appeared hopeless in February 1939 French political leaders were quick to repair relations with the victorious Nationalists through the granting of *de jure* recognition to the Franco regime and the signing of the Bérard-Jordana agreement.<sup>76</sup> Clearly, from the ideological point of view Franco's victory was satisfactory for the British government and their official advisors: but while, unlike the Labour party, they did not mourn the passing of the Spanish Republic it is to their credit that in February 1939 they tried to achieve safeguards against reprisals as a condition for granting *de jure* recognition to Franco's regime.<sup>77</sup>

The decision of Britain and France to adhere to a policy of non-intervention did not safeguard their strategic position in the western Mediterranean and along the western Atlantic seaboard. British military authorities had hoped at best to secure a benevolently neutral Spain in any future European conflict; at worst a strictly neutral Spain. In March 1939 the joint planning staff were compelled to recognise that, in view of German and Italian armed assistance Franco's Spain might be hostile or at any rate afford facilities to the Axis powers. This led them to take a serious view of the broader strategic implications:

If Spain were hostile there would be a threat not only to Gibraltar, but also to Portuguese territory, and this might involve us in further

commitments in this area. The use of Spanish harbours, including those in the Balearic and Canary Islands, by German and Italian naval forces, especially submarines, would add considerably to our difficulties, particularly in the Atlantic and of France's communications in the Western Mediterranean.<sup>78</sup>

Hence, they considered it imperative to secure Spain's neutrality. The French authorities were no less concerned to ensure a neutral Spain. During the second stage of the Anglo-French military talks in late April-early May 1939, they admitted the vulnerability of south and south-western France to air attack from aerodromes in Spanish territory and the grave disadvantage of having a third frontier to defend. They also took into account Spain's importance as a supplier of strategic materials, notably iron ore, copper, pyrites, mercury, lead and zinc.<sup>79</sup>

Strategic issues alone made it imperative for the two western powers to improve their relations with the new Spain. Britain was only too willing to try, and enlisted the full support of Portugal. However, despite the Bérard-Jordana agreement France made little headway in its promotion of a Franco-Spanish *rapprochement*. On 8 April 1939 Franco's adhesion to the anti-Comintern pact was made public, fortifications were erected on the Spanish side of the frontier between the French and Spanish zones in Morocco, and the Spanish authorities refused to take back 400,000 refugees who had fled over the frontier during the last days of the civil war and its immediate aftermath.<sup>80</sup> British and Portuguese efforts during May and June to persuade the French to make concessions to Franco's Spain proved unavailing owing to French insistence that they would not return the remaining Spanish gold, deposited in France by the Republicans and not sent to Moscow, unless there was substantial progress on the refugee question. However, in view of the increased possibility of war and the need of France's expanding economy for Spanish Republican labour, Paris relented in July and returned the gold to Madrid.<sup>81</sup> Despite their best efforts, the Allies could not stop Spain from adopting a policy of benevolent neutrality towards Germany in September 1939 or, after France's collapse and Italy's entry into the war in June 1940, a more threatening policy of non-belligerency.

Some consolation was, however, obtained through Britain's success in preserving the Anglo-Portuguese Alliance. The Salazar regime's abhorrence of non-intervention and ardent support of Franco's cause throughout the civil war had presented Germany and Italy with a golden opportunity to undermine Anglo-Portuguese relations, but though they sought strenuously to win Portugal to their side, they failed owing to the intensive counter efforts of the British authorities.<sup>82</sup> The British achieved further success in the economic sphere, not least because of the limited success of German policy. The sovereignty of British companies, in the pyrites trade for example, was preserved; supplies to Britain were not restricted during or after the civil war while as early as May 1939 the Rio Tinto Company was not penalised by the Spanish authorities for refusing to supply Germany. Franco's determination to pursue a strongly nationalistic economic strategy only constrained the activities of British companies in Spain at a later date.<sup>83</sup>



Historians tend to characterise French foreign policy in the late 1930s as being subservient to that of Britain; that at least France obeyed its “English governess.” In this version France’s invention of, and commitment to, non-intervention in Spain in August 1936 was a direct response to British pressure: without it French intervention would have been inevitable. By the same token the decision of the French government in June 1938 to close their frontier with Spain which had been open since March was purportedly a consequence of British pressure.<sup>84</sup> French policy towards the Spanish civil war tends to bear out Anthony Adamthwaite’s view that “in practice French policy was much more assertive and independent than supposed.”<sup>85</sup> Yvon Delbos and the Quai d’Orsay initiated the policy of non-intervention, then sought British support since otherwise, they feared, the more extreme elements in the Popular Front would succeed in forcing France to intervene in Spain. Accordingly, throughout August and September 1936 they covertly solicited British pressure, which admittedly the British authorities willingly provided.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, in June 1938 the British ambassador, Sir Eric Phipps, strongly advised the French government to close their frontier with Spain, but the French needed little persuasion. As Georges Bonnet, the foreign minister, later told Phipps, his government were convinced that if they did not close the frontier the risk of war would have been increased by 100 per cent because they had heard that a large shipment of war *matériel* had left or was about to leave the Soviet Union for Le Havre and Bordeaux for trans-shipment to Spain. Bonnet deplored “Russia’s renewed and unhealthy wish to fish in troubled Spanish waters far removed from her own territory, which would therefore be immune from the disturbances and damage she wished to cause others.”<sup>87</sup>

Earlier in the civil war, in October 1937, the French government had agreed to keep the Pyrenean frontier closed, partly in deference to British wishes but largely because apart from some Socialists there were few Frenchmen who wanted to open it. Senior officials at the Quai d’Orsay, notably Massigli and Léger, were opposed to opening the frontier because they believed “it would be completely ineffective in so far as it was intended to help the Valencia government to free Spain from the Italian stranglehold.” As an alternative to opening the frontier the Quai d’Orsay favoured the occupation of Minorca as a *gage*.<sup>88</sup> The French authorities also demonstrated their independence by refusing to follow London’s lead in exchanging agents with the Nationalist authorities in Spain. For their part the British government were often irritated by French attempts to disregard non-intervention. Early in September 1936, for example, Britain strongly reprimanded France for allowing several hundred Republican militiamen, who had fled from Irun into France, to return rearmed in special trains to the Pyrenean frontier where they were able to rejoin the Catalan anarchists. When, in October 1937, the French suggested a temporary authorisation of the transit of arms to the Spanish government unless the Italians desisted from further armed intervention in Spain, the British cabinet rejected the suggestion out of hand, deploring it for “casting doubts on Italian pledges and good faith.”<sup>89</sup> While in these cases the British view tended to prevail it can hardly be claimed that the French were passive or supine camp followers.

Most probably during the late 1930s the greatest divergence in the respective policies of France and Britain occurred in respect of their relations with Italy. The Spanish civil war contributed significantly to the deterioration in Franco-Italian relations, to the chagrin of British authorities who, since the summer of 1936, had made strenuous efforts to repair their relations with Mussolini. Neville Chamberlain acknowledged the civil war as a major obstacle to the appeasement of Italy when he informed George VI that Spain was the “nigger in the woodpile” and that “unless and until that affair is settled there will always be the danger of an open quarrel with France and always the road to appeasement will be blocked.”<sup>90</sup> Unfortunately for Chamberlain, the end of the Spanish conflict did not herald an improvement in Franco-Italian relations. While Daladier was prepared, eventually, to make some concessions to Franco’s Spain, he was not prepared, despite the urgings of Chamberlain, Halifax and even Bonnet, to do the same for Mussolini’s Italy before September 1939.<sup>91</sup>

The deterioration of Franco-Italian relations was not matched by an improvement in Franco-Soviet relations even though the Soviet Union had intervened on the side of the Spanish Republic. During 1937 the French authorities refused to consider military conversations as a means of strengthening and consolidating the Franco-Soviet pact of 1935. Like their British counterparts they saw no virtue in the pact other than as a means of preventing a Nazi-Soviet *rapprochement*, and the purges in the Red Army during the middle of 1937 ended any lingering thought that conversations might be possible or desirable.<sup>92</sup> The Soviet failure to win over Britain and France to collective security through Spain and Czechoslovakia reinforced Moscow’s isolationism after September 1938 and increased fear and suspicion that the western powers intended to direct Germany eastwards. In view of these apprehensions, made worse in November 1938 by Moscow’s awareness that German-Japanese-Italian negotiations for a tripartite pact had progressed to a new and active stage after Munich, it was clearly prudent for the Soviet authorities to withdraw completely from their involvement in Spain.<sup>93</sup>

By the time the Soviet Union revealed a renewed interest in collective security, in the form of Stalin’s offer of a tripartite alliance to Britain and France in April 1939, the Spanish Republic had passed into history and the civil war could no longer be utilised as a catalyst for an Anglo-French-Soviet *rapprochement*. In view of the refusal of the British authorities to take advantage of the opportunity provided by the Spanish conflict for such a *rapprochement* it is surely ironic that the chiefs of staff should have advised in May 1939 that “the possibility of antagonising Franco’s Spain should not from the military point of view be allowed to stand in the way of the conclusion of a pact with Soviet Russia.”<sup>94</sup> The pact with Soviet Russia was not to materialise until more than two years later in the context of a much greater conflagration than the civil war in Spain. Those powers who had fought war almost by proxy in Spain between 1936 and 1939 were then engaged in a titanic contest which resulted in the demise of European Fascism and which paved the way for the Bolshevisation of eastern Europe and the democratisation of western and central Europe. The exception to these trends was the Iberian Peninsula which survived for 30 years longer as the last redoubt of the authoritarian right in Europe.