

Spain's relief effort during the First World War

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Although Spain maintained a position of outward neutrality throughout the First World War, Spanish neutrality was often compromised by the pressures put on the country from both belligerents. In addition to that, views on how to shield Spain from the effects of war also diverged widely. Highlighting Spain's relief effort during the First World War will serve as a backdrop for an examination of the often contradictory nature of Spanish neutrality. This examination will look at the actions and motivations of individual Spanish decision makers who were involved in Spain's relief effort for prisoners of war. To gain a better understanding of their motivation, the paper will firstly outline Spain's domestic situation at the outbreak of war and also explain the country's international standing in 1914. How Spain used its position of neutrality will be analysed with particular view to the external pressure and outside interference the country was experiencing. An investigation of Spanish activity during the war will highlight the fluidity between the concepts of belligerency and neutrality.

By the outbreak of the First World War Spain, a former great colonial power, had become a minor player on the world stage. The search for a reformation of the country became more urgent after the disastrous defeat in the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the subsequent loss of Spain's last overseas colonies. Newly emerging political groupings, such as Republicans, Socialists and Catalan as well as Basque regionalists, were gathering momentum and began to challenge the dominance of the conservative ruling elite represented by the Spanish crown, army and church. Plagued by internal divisions and preoccupied with the search for a regeneration of Spain, the country had to position itself in the ensuing global conflict while also facing great external pressures.

Despite Spain's neutrality, the war would soon deepen existing divisions within Spanish society and accelerate the process of reform started at the end of the nineteenth

century. The ideological gap between the ruling elite and its critics during the First World War was marked by their respective allegiances with one of the belligerents. In Spain, the European conflict played out as a confrontation of the *Germanófilos*, supporters of Germany and the Central Powers, and the *Francófilos*, supporters of the allies. These camps embodied a clash of ideals: the preservation of traditional values and a hierarchical society versus modernisation and a liberal government.

Although not a major player in the conflict, Spain's geographical position was of great strategic importance for the belligerents since it allowed control over the sea routes to the western Mediterranean as well as the eastern Atlantic. The Spanish coastline offered an ideal refuge for submarines. The country was also able to produce and provide a wide variety of foodstuffs and military supplies vital for the war effort of the Allies and the Central Powers.¹ Britain in particular depended on Spanish supplies of iron ore and pyrites. In return, Spain urgently needed coal and cotton as well as other supplies which could only be obtained from the Allies. This co-dependency was used by the British government to pressure Spain into cooperating with the demands of the Entente.² Given Spain's geographical proximity to Britain and France as well as its economic reliance on both countries, Germany never seriously considered for Spain to actively join the Central Powers in their war effort. Instead the German effort in Spain was focussed on enforcing strict neutrality and therefore ensuring the country would not join the Entente.

The outside pressure Spain experienced from both belligerents needs to be taken into account when considering the country's activity as a neutral agent in the conflict. Spain's domestic instability and political weakness are equally important factors in examining the motivations of individual actors such as the Spanish king, Alfonso XIII, and his diplomats.

¹Ron M. Carden, *German policy toward neutral Spain, 1914 – 1918* (New York, London, 1987), pp 2–3.

²National Archives, Kew (N.A.), CAB/24/7, Image ref. 0064, Cabinet Papers, War Cabinet, Memorandum by the Minister of Munitions, 14.3.1917. Also see, NA, CAB/24/35, Image ref. 0073, Cabinet Papers, Intelligence Bureau, Department of Information 1917, Weekly report on Spain XV, 13.12.1917.

Their desire for Spain to regain importance on a world stage, primarily linked to regaining colonies, often served as the driving force behind activity that breached the rules of neutral conduct. Spain was caught in the conundrum of wishing to stay out of the military conflict for the sake of domestic stability but yet wanting to actively participate enough in order to gain international recognition at the end of the war.

During the First World War the Spanish monarch, Alfonso XIII, used Spain's position of neutrality to carry out humanitarian work on behalf of prisoners of war and their families. Financed and initiated by Alfonso himself, an office in his Madrid palace, established in August 1915, dealt with inquiries relating to the treatment, whereabouts and repatriation of POW's on both sides of the conflict. Forty employees, led by the king's secretary, processed up to 20,000 letters a month. Alfonso would even respond to some inquiries personally³ and was also called upon by Allied diplomats to prevent the execution of German death penalties.⁴ British ambassador Sir Arthur Hardinge recalled how the king, as well as his representative in Brussels – the Marquis de Villalobar – repeatedly appealed to the German government for leniency in carrying out sentences. For example in the case of British nurse Edith Cavell, who was accused of aiding enemy troops and of having violated the neutrality of the Red Cross, Villalobar and his American colleague in Brussels petitioned the German government, though to no avail.⁵ In some cases, however, King Alfonso managed to convert death penalties into life sentences by appealing to the German emperor as well as the pope. The death sentence of two French women, who were accused of a similar offence to that of Cavell, was commuted into penal servitude for life due to Alfonso's intervention.⁶

³Javier Tusell, Genoveva G. Queipo de Llano, *Alfonso XIII. El rey polémico* (Madrid, 2001), p. 301.

⁴Dirk Zeiseler, *Spanien im Kalkül der britischen Kriegspolitik 1914 – 1918. Die politische, wirtschaftliche und propagandistische Bedeutung eines neutralen Landes für Großbritannien im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin, Vienna, 2002), p. 93.

⁵Arthur Hardinge, *A diplomatist in Europe* (London, 1927), p. 262.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 263.

To prevent Allied hospital ships from being attacked, the king arranged for Spanish officers to be placed on board of these ships so that they could certify they were not ships of war in disguise when challenged by German submarines or other enemy vessels. Sir Arthur Hardinge stated that ‘It would indeed be difficult to exaggerate the beneficent effect of the Spanish Sovereign’s humanitarian activities in diminishing the destructive effects of the war, or the number of lives which they saved.’⁷ Although the king’s office offered support to prisoners of both belligerents, it was mainly the Allies which benefited from Alfonso’s humanitarian organisation with the majority of requests coming from French and Belgian prisoners.⁸

Besides the king, Spanish diplomats often represented Allied interest in the support of prisoners of war. Polo de Bernabé, Spanish ambassador at Berlin, served as representative for most Allied powers in Germany and oversaw prison camp inspections, supervision of purchase and distribution of supplies and the allocation of financial assistance to prisoners.⁹ Already by the end of 1914 Polo had been entrusted with looking after French, Belgian and Russian interests in Germany receiving funds from the Russian and French government for the relief of their prisoners. Before entering the war, the United States often organised relief work in conjunction with other neutral powers such as Spain.¹⁰

In Belgium it was the Spanish emissary, Marquis de Villalobar, who was active in organising help for Allied prisoners. A plaque erected at the house in Brussels in which he had resided between 1913 and 1919 commemorates the work he did on behalf of the Belgian people. The inscription reads: ‘The Marquis de Villalobar, Spanish Ambassador, lived in this

⁷Ibid., p. 263.

⁸Tusell & Queipo de Llano, *Alfonso XIII*, p. 301.

⁹Kenneth Steuer, *Pursuit of an unparalleled opportunity: the American YMCA and prisoner-of-war diplomacy among the Central Power nations during World War I, 1914-1923* (New York, 2009), available at Gutenberg-e, (<http://www.gutenberg-e.org/steuer/archive/detail/C12.p06B.LuisPolodeBernabe.jpg.html>) (1 June 2013).

¹⁰Memorandum by Chandler P. Anderson, 1.12.1914, pp 1001-2. United States Department of State. Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, 1915. Supplement, The World War (1915), available at University of Wisconsin Digital Collections, (<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS>) (1 June 2013).

building from 1913 to 1919. During the Great War he made this the centre of the kind deeds of S.M. the king Alphonse XIII and of his own work on behalf of the Belgian population. Gratitude from the Belgian-Spanish Association.¹¹ Under the auspices of Villalobar and his American colleague, Joseph Brand Whitlock, the relief effort for the Belgian civilian population was organised, ensuring the distribution of food.¹²

From the early stages of the war Alfonso tried to position himself as a mediator between the warring parties and his humanitarian work was certainly part of this effort. The king's attempts to form a neutral alliance with Romania and Italy, however, did not bear fruits.¹³ Similarly, the suggestion of a joint mediation with the United States, sent by the Spanish foreign minister to the American Department of State at the beginning of the war, fell on deaf ears since Woodrow Wilson thought the timing was not right to make a peace proposal.¹⁴ The Dutch also failed to obtain the support of the United States, a great-power neutral with the ability to make an impact on the belligerents. To protect the rights of neutrals, the Dutch, who also had aspirations to hold a peace conference at The Hague, suggested a Dutch-American alliance. This was rejected by the Americans since they were unwilling to be tied down in any alliance.¹⁵

Other neutral countries tried to form alliances in order to defend their rights during wartime. The three Scandinavian countries came together and subsequently tried to attract other neutrals to join them. In October 1914 Norwegian, Swedish, Danish and Dutch representatives met in Stockholm to discuss neutral rights in wartime trade, in particular the effects war was having on maritime commerce. The United States declined to join the

¹¹Plaque Marquis de Villalobar, available at Brussels Remembers, Memorials of Brussels, (<http://www.brusselsremembers.com/memorials/marquis-de-villalobar>) (15 June 2013).

¹²Oscar Freiherr von der Lancken Wakenitz, *Meine dreissig Dienstjahre, 1888-1918. Potsdam – Paris – Brüssel* (Berlin, 1931), p. 194.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Javier Ponce, 'Spanish neutrality during the First World War' in Hertog, Johan den; Kruizinga, Samuël (eds), *Caught in the middle. Neutrals, neutrality and the First World War* (Amsterdam, 2011), pp 53-66.

¹⁵Marc Frey, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlande. Ein neutrales Land im politischen Kalkuel der Kriegsgegner* (Berlin. 1998), pp 102-3.

conference and the Netherlands eventually stopped participating in the joint neutral effort. However, the three Scandinavian countries drafted a declaration regarding neutral rights based on the idea of the freedom of the seas which was forwarded to the belligerent governments in November 1914.¹⁶ Without the support from the United States the effort of the Scandinavian countries made little impact on the warring parties.¹⁷

To protest the British blockade and the restrictions on trade arising from it, several Latin American countries approached the American government but no concerted neutral effort resulted from this initiative.¹⁸ Germany was particularly interested in a neutral alliance and hoped that pressure exerted from the neutral countries would force Britain to loosen the blockade and also lead to peace terms more favourable to Germany. The German ministry for foreign affairs, *Auswärtige Amt*, encouraged the Spanish and Dutch governments respectively to work closer together with the Scandinavian neutrals.¹⁹

Without support from the US, Spain saw no merit in joining the alliance of Northern European neutrals.²⁰ It was believed the neutral alliance would have little practical success and would not enable Spain to withstand Allied economic pressure. King Alfonso thought his ambitions to act as arbiter at peace negotiations would be best realised by waiting for the end of the war when belligerents and neutrals would come together to make lasting agreements.²¹ It was Alfonso's wish for Spain to regain a position of importance amongst the European powers. He thought by hosting a peace conference this could be achieved. Berlin encouraged

¹⁶Olav Riste, *The Neutral Ally: Norway's relations with belligerent powers in the First World War* (Oslo, 1965), p. 60.

¹⁷Carsten Holbraad, *Danish neutrality: a study in the foreign policy of a small state* (Oxford, 1991), p. 52.

¹⁸Frey, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlande*, pp 104-5.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p.107.

²⁰Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin (P.A.), R20518, Weltkrieg, WK Nr. 2b, Zusammenschluss der neutralen Staaten zwecks Wahrung ihrer Neutralität 1916–19, Romberg (Bern) to Auswärtiges Amt, 15.12.1916.

²¹P.A., R20518, Weltkrieg, WK Nr. 2b, Zusammenschluss der neutralen Staaten zwecks Wahrung ihrer Neutralität 1916–19, Lancken to Auswärtiges Amt, 18.7.1917; Ratibor to Auswärtiges Amt, 25.8.1917.

the Spanish king in his hopes, since the conservative monarch was seen to be more favourable to the German cause.²²

German diplomats in Spain worked continuously throughout the war on ascertaining Alfonso's political leanings and also on influencing the king by entertaining his ambitions for hosting a peace conference as well as his territorial desires, more pressing after Spain's defeat in 1898. The German ambassador at Madrid, Prince Maximilian von Ratibor und Corvey, confirmed to the *Auswärtige Amt* in October 1914 that the Spanish royal family was siding with Germany and trying their utmost to increase sympathy for the Central Powers amongst the Spanish people. The Spanish royal court was also aware that an alliance with France would aggravate the army and the traditional Carlists,²³ possibly leading to revolutionary uprisings threatening the stability of Spain's monarchy.²⁴ Before the outbreak of the war Alfonso spoke freely about his antipathy for France in an audience with his military attaché at Berlin, Major Valdivia. Valdivia was able to report to his German counterpart in Madrid, Major Kalle, that the king had no intention of supporting France in the case of a European war. In matters of foreign affairs, however, he was forced to bow to the demands of Spain's neighbour. The German military attaché already detected the difficulties that might arise from this dependency on France and questioned whether Spain would be able to resist being drawn into binding military pacts allowing transport of divisions and supporting the Entente in the Mediterranean.²⁵

Shortly after the outbreak of the war in a meeting with Kalle, Alfonso expressed his admiration for German mobilisation and left no doubt, according to the German military attaché, that he was a supporter of the German cause. In his audience Kalle was also given

²²P.A., R20518, Weltkrieg, WK Nr. 2b, Zusammenschluss der neutralen Staaten zwecks Wahrung ihrer Neutralität 1916–19, Jagow to Lancken, 19.9.1916.

²³The political movement of Carlism disputed the Bourbon's legitimacy to the Spanish throne.

²⁴P.A., R11998, Spanien 61 – Die politischen Beziehungen zwischen Spanien und Deutschland 1911–16, Ratibor to *Auswärtige Amt* 15.10.1914.

²⁵P.A., R11833, Militärangelegenheiten Spaniens 1913–24, Kalle to royal ministry of war 17.6.1914.

the impression that the king was not opposed to the idea of serious damage being inflicted on Britain and strongly believed in a German victory.²⁶ German diplomats first began to exert pressure on the Spanish monarch in October 1914 after a swift victory had escaped the German army and Portugal was turning against Germany. State secretary von Jagow instructed ambassador Ratibor to try and sway Alfonso and the Spanish government to side against Portugal. In turn the *Auswärtige Amt* offered Spain a free hand in Portugal and the return of Gibraltar. This offer was rejected out of fear of an occupation of the Balears and the Canary Islands as well as Spain's mainland ports if Spain should act against Portugal.²⁷ Whatever Alfonso's personal convictions were, he was not willing to risk Spain being dragged into the war, however tempting the territorial offers were.

Throughout the war the king's true sympathies remained ambiguous. Both belligerents, constantly vying for his favour, frequently claimed to have him on their side. French diplomats attested to Alfonso having been a strict observer of neutrality at the outbreak of the war. The French ambassador claimed, though, that the king had confirmed to him that his sympathies were with France.²⁸ British ambassador Hardinge stated in his memoirs that the king always remained strictly impartial in the European war but Hardinge also believed Alfonso's sympathies were with the Allies.²⁹ The king himself often gave contradictory statements and assurances to the Allies and the Central Powers and kept his politics flexible, reacting to internal demands and external pressures in accordance with the needs of the hour.

The king's predicament during the war was similar to that of many amongst the European aristocracy. National allegiances now took precedence over familial ties and relations. Alfonso's English wife, Queen Victoria Eugenia, had two brothers and an uncle

²⁶P.A., R11998, Spanien 61 – Die politischen Beziehungen zwischen Spanien und Deutschland 1911–16, Ratibor to Bethmann Hollweg 23.9.1914.

²⁷Benedikt Rüdhardt, *Deutsch-Spanische Beziehungen 1898–1931* (Freising, 1988), pp. 165-6.

²⁸Tusell & Queipo de Llano, *Alfonso XIII*, p. 285.

²⁹Hardinge, *A diplomatist in Europe*, p. 262.

fighting in the British army, while the brother of queen mother Maria Christina was the head of the Austro-Hungarian army.³⁰ Due to Alfonso's family connections to both belligerents, the Spanish king was almost obliged to maintain good relations with both sides³¹ without antagonising either of them and, most importantly, without being accused of breaking Spain's neutrality. His commitment was first and foremost to Spain as he tried to shield his country from the horrors of the war.³²

The Spanish king continued his role as his country's ambassador throughout the First World War. His diplomatic efforts were carried out with the hope of re-establishing Spain amongst the great powers, which also meant extending her diminishing colonial empire. Though his true allegiances were difficult to pin down, the king kept in close contact with the German administration during the war and often initiated diplomatic activity regarding colonial expansion without the knowledge of his government.³³ This could be viewed as pro-German, although, as previously stated, Alfonso kept his policies flexible in accordance with the course of the war and with an acute awareness of Spain's economic dependence on the Allies.

Due to pressure from France, Alfonso was forced to take measures against German activity in Morocco and could not prevent the expulsion of a German agent from Melilla in September 1916.³⁴ German agents had been stirring up revolts in the French protectorate with the hope to undermine French rule in the region. The Spanish king, keen to extend his North African empire, had been in close contact with the German embassy, who kept him informed about the progress of their agents.³⁵ In October 1917 Kalle had heard from an informer who

³⁰Julian Cortes-Cavanillas, *Alfonso XIII y la guerra del 14* (Madrid, 1976), p. 12.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 13.

³²*Ibid.*, pp 49-50.

³³P.A., R11937, Spanien 55 Nr. 1 – Das spanische Königshaus 1913–17, Military attaché embassy Madrid to Auswärtige Amt, 16.1.1916.

³⁴P.A., R12013, Spanien 61 secr. – Die Beziehungen zwischen Spanien und Deutschland 1916, Kalle to Auswärtige Amt, 17.9.1916.

³⁵P.A., R11937, Spanien 55 Nr. 1 – Das spanische Königshaus 1913–17, Military attaché embassy Madrid to Auswärtige Amt, 16.1.1916.

was in close contact with the Spanish prime minister that the Allies had proof the king was allowing a secret news exchange between Madrid and Berlin behind the back of Prime Minister Romanones. As a result of that trade negotiations for coal deliveries to Spain had been abandoned and, according to Kalle, Spain was threatened with being sealed off economically.³⁶

British diplomats, on the other hand, expressed concern over Kalle's influence on the king and blamed the German military attaché's propaganda campaign for the king's belief in a German victory.³⁷ In order to counter that propaganda the Foreign Office suggested requesting audiences for allied military attachés.³⁸ By November 1917 British diplomats were also worried about how events in Russia and Greece would affect the behaviour of the Spanish monarch, especially since German propaganda honed in on the aristocracy's suspicion of Allied democracy.³⁹

As the war continued it became increasingly difficult for the German diplomats to ascertain where Alfonso's true allegiances lay. Some historians assessed the king began to take a pro-Allied stance as the war progressed.⁴⁰ The economic pressure exerted by the Allies was certainly a reason why Alfonso often had to bow to British and French demands which subsequently could be interpreted as a move closer to the Allied camp. With Portugal entering the war in March 1916, shortly followed by Rumania in August 1916, the king must have not only been aware of the decreasing likelihood of a German victory but was also faced with the reality of his country being surrounded by Allied states. An aggressive pro-German policy would have been economic and political suicide for Spain which would not have had the

³⁶Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg (B.A.M.), RM5/2417, Telegramme an den Militärattaché in Madrid Mai – Dez. 1917, Kalle to OHL, 5.10.1917.

³⁷N.A., FO371/2758, Foreign Office, Spain & Portugal (War) 1916, Hardinge to Grey 17.3.1916. See also N.A., FO371/3033, Foreign Office, Spain & Portugal (War) 1917, Hardinge to Lord Robert Cecil 7.5.1917.

³⁸N.A., FO371/3033, Foreign Office, Spain & Portugal (War) 1917, Major Grant to Hardinge 7.5.1917.

³⁹N.A., CAB/24/31, Image ref. 0040, Cabinet Papers, Intelligence Bureau, Department of Information 1917, Weekly report on Spain XIII, 7.11.1917.

⁴⁰Carden, *German policy toward neutral Spain*, pp 129-30.

military power to defend its borders and would have been unable to survive without Allied trade.

Despite his efforts on behalf of Allied POWs, the Spanish monarch was not favoured by Britain to lead a peace conference.⁴¹ While not entertaining all of Alfonso's ambitions, British diplomats still needed to maintain good relations with the king. Spanish-British relations during the war, however, were marked by mistrust. As Dirk Zeiseler assessed, a negative image of Spain persisted within British government circles and equally even amongst pro-Allied Spaniards historically grown prejudices against Great Britain prevailed.⁴² Although not thought of as an equal partner by the British Empire,⁴³ Spain's potential value as an ally in the war was assessed positively by the Foreign Office.

Spain joining the Entente would have enabled the Spanish government to take measures against trading with the enemy, therefore opening up Spanish markets to British and allied trade. The disappearance of German businesses in Spain would have been profitable for Britain. Another advantage to the Foreign Office was the positive effect that Spain's belligerence might have had on Catholic opinion throughout Europe and America – although it was doubtful whether that would have been of any practical value. Possible demands for colonies, in particular Tangier, Gibraltar and a free hand in Portugal, were seen as a considerable disadvantage of Spain joining the Allies. The Foreign Office assessed 'Spain is quite incapable of developing Tangier efficiently'⁴⁴ and although a cession of Gibraltar would have been beneficial to British-Spanish relations, it was a highly unpopular issue in Britain. Allowing Spain a free hand in Portugal would have been a gross breach of faith to Britain's oldest ally. Therefore, the Foreign Office considered a neutral Spain as most advantageous to

⁴¹Zeiseler, *Spanien im Kalkül der britischen Kriegspolitik*, pp 126–8.

⁴²Ibid., p. 255. Also see NA, CAB/24/24 21.8.1917, Image ref. 0013, Cabinet Papers, Intelligence Bureau, Department of Information 1917, Weekly report on Spain IX. Spain described as a very backward and uneducated country with a population totally ignorant of politics.

⁴³Zeiseler, *Spanien im Kalkül der britischen Kriegspolitik*, p. 255.

⁴⁴N.A., CAB/24/7, Image ref. 0098, Cabinet Papers, War Cabinet, Foreign Office memorandum, undated.

Britain and was confident that if the Allies won the war, Spain's material interests would forge lasting ties between both countries.⁴⁵

To counter German influence in Spain and curb Germanophile tendencies, the British government exercised economic pressure, threatening Madrid at times with coal embargos.⁴⁶ This method was also employed in relations with other neutrals such as the Netherlands and Sweden.⁴⁷ The Spanish government, on the other hand, used Britain's dependency on iron ore as a lever in negotiations. By early 1917 it declared that any ships coming from Britain were only allowed to transport iron ore if their load already consisted of one third of coal. Equally, any ships leaving Spanish iron ore ports had to reserve at least 33% of their loading space for Andalusian oranges.⁴⁸ To formalise trade arrangements between both countries and to secure Spain's coal supply, the Cortina agreement was signed on 19 April 1917. The British agreement was followed by contracts with the United States and France. In March 1918 the US government consented to cotton and oil exports in return for Spanish fruits and ore. The same month the Spanish-French agreement outlined unlimited exports of copper, zinc, lead, ore and wool to France, while the French government promised to import Spanish citrus fruits and wine and also permitted the transit of some goods from Germany and Switzerland.⁴⁹ This undoubtedly brought Spain closer to the Allied camp, although with the country still maintaining its neutrality.

To mobilise the large pro-German and pro-neutrality sections within Spanish society, German diplomats in Spain tried their utmost to curb Allied influence.⁵⁰ In their covert and propaganda activity they greatly relied on Spanish collaborators. One of Germany's most

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Zeiseler, *Spanien im Kalkül der britischen Kriegspolitik*, p. 258.

⁴⁷Eric W. Osborne, *Britain's economic blockade of Germany, 1914–1919* (London, 2004), p. 138.

⁴⁸Zeiseler, *Spanien im Kalkül der britischen Kriegspolitik*, p. 258.

⁴⁹Lilian Gelos de Vaz Ferreira, *Die Neutralitätspolitik Spaniens während des Ersten Weltkrieges – unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der deutsch-spanischen Beziehungen* (Hamburg, 1966), p. 95.

⁵⁰For more detail on the German propaganda campaign in Spain during the First World War see Anne Rosenbusch, 'Por la patria y por la verdad – Germany's effort to maintain Spanish neutrality during the First World War', available at: <http://run.unl.pt/handle/10362/10758> (Conference paper Nov. 2013).

important collaborators in that activity was the Marquis de Villalobar, Spanish ambassador in Belgium. Villalobar kept in close contact with Baron Oscar von der Lancken, chief political advisor to the German governor general in Belgium. Lancken had been embassy secretary at Madrid from 1906 to 1907.⁵¹ Though not resident in Spain, Villalobar proved to be a useful ally, particularly when it came to influencing King Alfonso XIII. His frequent visits to the royal court allowed for German ideas to be transmitted through him.⁵² Regular meetings between Villalobar and von der Lancken also enabled a better insight into Spanish domestic affairs and opinions which were reported back to the *Auswärtige Amt* and the embassy at Madrid. Villalobar's hope was that a German victory would also elevate Spain into a position of power and allow her to fulfil territorial ambitions by reclaiming Gibraltar and annexing Portugal.⁵³ According to von der Lancken's memoirs, Villalobar was first and foremost a Spaniard and an ardent monarchist who believed that the future of the Spanish throne would be much more secure with the German Kaiser Reich by its side.⁵⁴ This was so despite having been embassy secretary in London for several years and having many friends amongst the British aristocracy, even being part of the inner circle of King Edward VII. In Brussels he was a popular guest at the royal court owing to the great admiration he held for the king of Belgium. Villalobar's wide-ranging connections and his great diplomatic skills made him a very valuable ally for Germany.⁵⁵

Also of great help to the German diplomatic effort in Spain were the Spanish representatives at Berlin. Ambassador Polo de Bernabé was a conservative *Germanófilo* who was in favour of strict neutrality.⁵⁶ Major Valdivia, the Spanish military attaché at Berlin, was equally pro-German. Like other collaborators, the Spanish diplomats in Berlin mainly

⁵¹Lancken Wakenitz, *Meine dreissig Dienstjahre*, pp 43-7.

⁵²P.A., R11950, Spanische Staatsmänner 1913–17, Lancken to Auswärtige Amt, 9.10.1916. Villalobar sent telegram to King to inform him about activities of Count Romanones.

⁵³P.A., R123013, Beeinflussung der spanischen Presse 1915–17, Lancken to Auswärtige Amt, 11.7.1915.

⁵⁴Lancken Wakenitz, *Meine dreissig Dienstjahre*, pp 164-5.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Francisco Romero Salvadó, *Spain 1914 – 1918. Between war and revolution* (London, 1999), pp 62–3.

facilitated a more direct news exchange between both countries which allowed the *Auswärtige Amt* to gain an insight into Spain's domestic politics, observe shifts in opinion of influential power players and plan a strategy accordingly. In view of the relief work undertaken by Spanish diplomats, Polo's and Villalobar's collaboration with the German administration becomes all the more puzzling. The realities of war and the suffering endured by POW's and civilians must have affirmed their belief that Spain should stay out of the conflict, yet they did not to blame Germany and the Central Powers for that suffering.

This could be partly attributed to the German media campaign in Spain which successfully presented the Central Powers as defenders of traditional, Catholic values and supporters of the Spanish monarchy and ruling order⁵⁷. On the other hand, the Allies were portrayed as a pro-interventionist force only using Spain to further their war effort. German propagandists ensured Spain would enforce its policy of strict neutrality and not join the war on the side of the Entente. As propagandist Carl Coppel wrote in 1920, 'What was Germany asking from Spain? Nothing. The abstention from a war in which the Spaniards had nothing to avenge nor claim from the Germans. What were England and France, the authors of Spanish decadence, asking from Spain? A break from neutrality, intervention, ruin. In return for what? What was the compensation? Nothing more than the honour to be enlisted amongst the whites, blacks and yellows of the great guard.'⁵⁸

Since joining Germany in the war was not a possibility, the *Germanófilos* showed their support for the Central Power's by defending strict neutrality. Their support was hidden behind declarations of patriotism and rejection of any outside interference in Spanish affairs.⁵⁹ Left-wing publications, on the other hand, argued that a departure from neutrality

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 10.

⁵⁸Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Abteilung Historische Drucke, Signatur Krieg 1914, 5966/1, Carlos Coppel, *Por la patria y por la verdad. Resumen de cinco años de propaganda* (Madrid, 1920), p. 210.

⁵⁹Romero Salvadó, *Spain 1914 – 1918*, p. 11.

would negatively impact on the working classes.⁶⁰ Being in favour of strict neutrality, however, did not hinder some *Germanófilos* from engaging in anti-neutral activity. The Marquis de Villalobar, for example, became involved in a campaign orchestrated by the German administration against the Spanish Prime Minister Count Romanones who was in office between 1915 and 1917. Romanones had favoured intervention on the side of the Allies from the outset of the war and was prepared to break off relations with Germany when the German submarine campaign also began to target Spanish vessels.⁶¹

At the beginning of September 1916 German ambassador Ratibor requested permission to do everything necessary to dispose of Romanones,⁶² causing a discussion amongst diplomats in Berlin and the German military high command (OHL – *Oberste Heeresleitung*) about how to proceed in the matter. State secretary von Jagow suggested involving the Marquis de Villalobar and using the king in order to get rid of Romanones.⁶³ However, Villalobar deemed Ratibor too indiscrete to instigate swaying the king by using persons close to him and instead thought it more useful to let Alfonso know Germany was fully committed to entrusting him with peace negotiations.⁶⁴ Villalobar's willingness as representative of a neutral nation to engage in such secret negotiations with one of the belligerents highlights how the lines between neutrality and belligerency often became blurred in this total war.

Ignoring Villalobar's advice, General Ludendorff demanded that Ratibor be authorised to find a way of removing Romanones without putting pressure on the Spanish king.⁶⁵ Finally the *Auswärtige Amt* had to give way to requests from the OHL and prompted Ratibor into action. The German military leadership gained substantial power during the war which

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 68.

⁶¹Romero Salvadó, *Spain 1914 – 1918*, p. 84.

⁶²P.A., R12013, Spanien 61 secr. – Die Beziehungen zwischen Spanien und Deutschland 1916, Ratibor to *Äuswärtige Amt* 9.9.1916.

⁶³Ibid., Jagow to embassy Madrid 12.9.1916.

⁶⁴Ibid., Lancken to Langwerth 14.9.1916.

⁶⁵Ibid., Legationsrat Grünau to *Äuswärtige Amt* 15.9.1916.

allowed it to have a decisive say in political matters. The military's interference in diplomatic relations with Spain highlights how political considerations were subjugated to military demands despite the risk of turning a hitherto friendly, neutral state against Germany. Portugal's entry into the war on the side of the Entente in March 1916 must have certainly played an important part in the decision to pursue a more aggressive campaign in Spain. Germany could not risk losing another neutral state to the Allies. In November 1916 the ambassador was able to confirm his plan to remove Romanones, consisting of supporting the neutrality campaign, instituting press propaganda and influencing Alfonso XIII, was in place.⁶⁶ From Belgium Villalobar discredited Romanones in front of the king.⁶⁷

The press campaign against the Prime Minister accused him of leading Spain into war out of personal financial interests due to his stake in mining industries in Morocco and coal and pyrite mines in Asturias and southern Spain.⁶⁸ The Count felt the crusade against him was becoming more and more violent, creating a suffocating atmosphere.⁶⁹ However, following the sinking of the Spanish steamer *San Fulgencio* in April 1917, Romanones was prepared to deliver an ultimatum to Germany which could have resulted in a break of diplomatic ties and a closer cooperation with the Allies.⁷⁰ But it would not come to that. Due to an unwillingness of Spain's ruling elite to deviate from the course of strict neutrality, Romanones failed to obtain support from his own party colleagues and eventually had to resign.⁷¹ The debate over neutrality revealed the reluctance of the Spanish ruling elite to pursue an active foreign policy, fearing that a closer alliance with the Entente would bring about drastic changes in Spain and infringe on their power and influence. Therefore the actions of Alfonso XIII and

⁶⁶P.A., R11950, Spanische Staatsmänner 1913–17, Ratibor to Äuswärtige Amt 4.11.1916.

⁶⁷Ibid., Lancken to Äuswärtige Amt 9.10.1916.

⁶⁸Bundesarchiv, Berlin (B.A.), R901/71832, Politische, wirtschaftliche und militärische Lage in Spanien 1917, Undated letter from August Hofer, not clear who addressed to.

⁶⁹Conde de Romanones, *Notas de una vida* (Madrid, 1999), p. 395.

⁷⁰Romero Salvadó, *Spain 1914 – 1918*, p. 84.

⁷¹Lilian Gelos de Vaz Ferreira, *Die Neutralitätspolitik Spaniens während des Ersten Weltkrieges – unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der deutsch-spanischen Beziehungen* (Hamburg, 1966), p. 68.

Spanish diplomats such as Villalobar have to be viewed as a defence of the Spanish monarchy rather than an agreement with the German cause.

Spain's internal divisions, its lack of a strong leadership and absence of a united political opposition combined with the external pressures from both belligerents, hindered the formulation of a coherent position on Spain's neutrality. Therefore it is not surprising that the actions of some neutral agents in Spain often appeared contradictory. Despite the country's economic dependence on the Allies, the majority of Spain's conservative ruling elite feared a closer alignment with the Entente would bring about radical change, severely undermining their power. While attempting to stay out of the military conflict and protect Spain's neutrality, Spanish decision makers nevertheless collaborated with the belligerents in the hope of re-gaining political significance on the world stage. In doing so, they not only undermined Spanish neutrality but also further aggravated internal political conflicts in Spain.

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