1914 1918 ONLINE International Encyclopedia of the First World War

Version 1.0 | Last updated 21 April 2017

Domestic Politics and Neutrality (Spain)

By Maximiliano Fuentes Codera

Despite the official neutrality maintained by Spain throughout the First World War, the conflict had a considerable impact on that country's internal politics. The political stances taken gave rise to a process that divided society into two opposing sectors from the very first months of the war. As a result, the entire system of the Restoration was affected by a grave crisis that reached its peak in the summer of 1917. As this process unfolded, the intellectuals, the diverse political groupings, the unions, the *Juntas de Defensa* (Defence Committees) and Catalan nationalism took on roles of great importance.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Although a huge number of books, pamphlets, and press articles were published in Spain during the years of the Great War and its immediate aftermath, it was not until the 1950s that the first important historiographical reflections on the impact of the conflict on the country itself began to appear.[1] In the decades that followed, research tended to focus on the labour movement and on economic aspects. Later, researchers began to address a diverse topics that included: the political impact and

the crisis of 1917; public opinion and the press; foreign propaganda; diplomacy; and the relationship between the war and substate nationalisms. Only in the last decade have the studies on the political and cultural impact of the conflict begun to find connections with what was happening in the rest of Europe.[2]

On 30 July 1914, *La Gaceta* published a royal decree requiring "the utmost neutrality of Spanish subjects".[3] At first, the government of Eduardo Dato (1856-1921) had no difficulties maintaining this position and, in general, society did not question the idea that Spain could not get involved in the conflict. The support for neutrality, with slight variations, was almost unanimous among political groups. Conservatives and liberals backed Dato, although some members of these groups, such as Álvaro de Figueroa, Count of Romanones (1863-1950), raised their voices in dissent. Those further to the right, despite their manifest leanings towards Germany, in particular the Carlists, also supported the official position. Meanwhile, the republicans and the left wing were faced with a somewhat paradoxical situation in that although they wanted the Entente to triumph – and they were quick to protest the German attack on Belgium – they also accepted that the country could not enter into the conflict. The only left-wing leader to break ranks was Alejandro Lerroux (1864-1949), the most vehement of the pro-Entente republicans. There was one special case: unlike the socialists, the union of anarcho-syndicalists (the CNT), maintained an internationalist stance throughout the conflict and denounced the war. However, the general consensus soon began to crumble and led to fierce dispute over neutrality which eventually developed into an intense internal political struggle.

Lack of Consensus about the War

After the First Battle of the Marne, the initial consensus gave way to a debate that within months turned into a heated controversy regarding the character of Spanish neutrality. There was talk of sympathies and phobias, and of different classes of neutrality: *benevolent*, *political*, *moral*, *critical*. Neutrality ceased to be a single universally accepted concept and instead was modified with dozens of adjectives each denoting very specific preferences that led, in turn, to cultural and political camps being set up along expressly antagonistic lines. In addition to the Carlists and Maurists, those who sympathized with Germany and the Central Powers included the court and the aristocracy as a whole, led by María Cristina (1858-1929), Queen, consort of Alfonso XII, King of Spain, daughter of the Elisabeth Franziska Maria, Archduchess of Austria (1831-1903). The Spanish army also assumed a moderately favourable stance towards Germany and, with the exception of Catalonian clergy, the Catholic Church was another pillar of Germanophile sentiment in Spain. Among the pro-Entente support, the most obvious were the various republican groupings, the socialist and reformist parties and, especially, the intellectuals.

In tune with the rest of the continent, this division was acted out in a series of manifestos promoted by various well-known intellectuals. After the neutralist *Manifest del Comitè d'Amics de la Unitat Moral d'Europa* [Manifesto of the Committee of Friends for the Moral Unity of Europe], drawn up in late November 1914, a group of Catalan intellectuals with links to nationalist republican sectors

signed the *Manifest dels Catalans* in March 1915. Then, a few months later, came the *Manifiesto de adhesión a la naciones aliadas* [Manifesto of solidarity with the allied nations], written by Ramón Pérez de Ayala (1880-1962) and promoted by the *Ateneo de Madrid* (in which Manuel Azaña (1880-1940) held an influential role) and the journal *España* (still being run by Jose Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955)). Finally, in December, the playwright Jacinto Benavente (1866-1954) published a manifesto entitled *Amistad Hispano-Germana* [Spanish-German Friendship]. Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), a leading pro-Entente militant, declared that this confrontation between pro-Entente and Germanophiles had become one of the focal points of Spanish life. Writing in *El Liberal* on 18 February 1916, he argued that, "Strictly speaking, there are no neutrals. We are all at war. There are only differences of degree."

In Catalonia, pro-Entente sympathies were more radical and the diverse republican groupings held far more militant views than their counterparts in the rest of Spain. This was combined with the ongoing development of Catalan nationalism, whose most active sectors believed that a favourable position towards France would result in French government support for Catalan demands for autonomy. The importance of the "national problem" was summed up perfectly by the Mallorcan intellectual, Gabriel Alomar (1873-1941), who, a few weeks after the beginning of the war, declared that "What is subject to neutrality is not the nation, but the State."[4] This radicalism was expressed in the magazine *Iberia*, published in Barcelona and subsidized by the French consulate. Likewise, the policy of internationalizing the "Catalan case" in Europe was promoted in the Swiss magazine, *Les Annales des Nationalités*. In addition, the diffusion of the "myth of the Catalan volunteers" fighting with the French Foreign Legion helped to project the Catalan question domestically and internationally. This "myth" – which involved claims of a purported 12,000 Catalan volunteers, when in reality the number was less than a thousand – was promoted by the Committee of Brotherhood led by Doctor Joan Solé i Pla (1874-1950), and took on such importance that in Madrid, in the final months of the conflict, a *Patronato de Voluntarios Españoles* came to be created.

The war was not only one of the central hubs of intellectual debate, but also became a cause of social confrontation. Eduardo Dato had warned shortly before the beginning of the conflict that this might occur: "If the Austro-Serbian conflict was the starting point of a European war, it will reach us all."[5] The tension was such that theatre functions relating to the conflict were suspended and the projection of films and newsreels referring to the war was prohibited. This was how the Hispanist, Albert Mousset (1883-1975), described it: "Everyone says that Spanish opinion of the European conflict is along the lines of their political affinities."[6] In this context, with financial assistance from the French, English and Italian embassies, the pro-Entente intellectuals proliferated in the newspapers, magazines, on trips to the Western Front, and at French academic conferences such as the one that took place in Madrid at the end of April 1916 with the notable presence of Henri Bergson (1859-1941).

Social and Political Unrest

Despite the debates on neutrality, Dato never abandoned his position. However, during the second half of 1915, the combination of inflation, a subsistence crisis (made worse by the return of more than 40,000 Spaniards who had fled the war zones) and high unemployment in the traditional sectors soon brought consequences, as was the case in all the neutral European countries: social unrest and mobilization intensified and heightened further still in the following year. Towards the end of 1915, Dato appeared to give in and Álvaro de Figueroa y Torres, the Count of Romanones, came to power on December 6. Thus began a crucial period in the hegemonic crisis of the ruling system.

Despite the favourable reception of Romanones' first moves to solve the subsistence crisis, the economic situation complicated the development of the planned policy. The difficulties arising from the European war fell mainly on the working classes. While the north and east of the country had experienced an extraordinary economic boom and strong industrial growth, central and southern areas continued to suffer the impact of unemployment and recession. By the beginning of 1916, the subsistence crisis had become a pressing reality: in just two years of war, the price of a kilo of bread had increased by 24.3 percent, and that of beef by 33.5 percent. In this situation, membership of labour movements rose markedly and acquired a strength hitherto unknown. The movement was ideologically and geographically divided between a Marxist tendency dominant in Castile, Asturias, and the Basque Country, and an anarchist tendency, which was especially influential in Catalonia, Levante and Andalusia. In 1916, social unrest and strikes increased drastically thanks to an alliance between the socialist trade union (UGT) and the anarcho-syndicalist (CNT).

The labour movement was not the only battle front that Romanones had to deal with. The two most important demands of Barcelona's industrial sectors since the beginning of the war – export subsidies and Barcelona to be declared a free port – had been met only with delaying tactics by the Dato government. Now, added to the gathering clamour of the workers came further criticism from the Catalan industrial and commercial bourgeoisie represented by Francesc Cambó (1876-1947) and the *Lliga Regionalista*. The role played by the army was of great importance too. Inflation and the economic difficulties caused by the war had affected army officers and the more disadvantaged sectors of society in the same way, and served to highlight the disparity between the Spanish army and the more modern armies in the rest of Europe. Romanones' attempts at military reform were a failure and towards the end of 1916, the *Juntas de Defensa* (Defence Committees) were organized by army officers in Barcelona to defend their interests, and these eventually spread throughout the country. The February Revolution in Russia and the role the army played in it, led the government to consider these committees as a new source of instability. At the end of March 1917, Alfonso XIII, King of Spain (1886-1941), fearing that their existence could constitute a potential threat to the regime, and Romanones, worried about his own continuity as president, attempted to dissolve them.

On 9 January 1917, at the Pless Conference, Germany decided to resume their submarine campaign – without restrictions – from the first day of the following month: any neutral ship headed for an allied port would be sunk. This initiative led the United States to break off diplomatic relations with Germany on 3 February. Despite pressure on Spain to take a similar stance, Romanones declared that it was impossible to abandon the policy of neutrality in the context of a deeply divided

society. He attempted to prevent the debate on this position from becoming public and continued to favour secret diplomacy with the Allies. This infuriated the entire political spectrum. By April, Spanish losses had already reached thirty-one boats and 80,000 tons of transport.

In this complex international context, the economic situation worsened, social unrest increased and opinion hardened that the government was not in a position to solve the most urgent problems. The impotence of the government was laid bare in the light of the demands of republicans and socialists to bring an end to the monarchy and give way to a “truly” democratic regime. The pressure was further increased by the demands of the workers of the UGT and the CNT.

In a context marked by the ongoing submarine warfare, the changes produced by the Russian revolutionary process and the imminent entry of the USA into the war, Romanones had decided to abandon neutrality when, on 6 April, the same day that the United States declared war on Germany, a German submarine sank the Spanish steamship *San Fulgencio*. For some days, Romanones remained in close contact with Allied diplomats to negotiate the conditions for abandoning neutrality. But his strategy suffered a severe setback when all the leaders of the Liberal and Conservative parties, with the exception of Joaquín Sánchez de Toca (1854-1942), spoke out against Spain’s entry into the war. When he left power in April 1917, Romanones left behind a fractured Liberal Party while a strong labour movement, the bourgeoisie and the army awaited the moment to deliver the final blow to the ruling dynasty. With its self-proclaimed sympathy for the Entente, the ideological polarization of the country had reached its peak.

The monarchy became the target of the pro-Entente forces, while at the same time, the militant labour movement was more united than ever, the Catalan regionalists considerably increased their capacity to influence Spanish policy and the army officers conspired in the Defence Committees. With all these elements as a general frame of reference, the intellectuals linked to the *Ateneo de Madrid* and the magazine *España*, which received financial support from the British and had become a meeting place for militant pro-Allies and the social and republican sectors under the leadership of Luis Araquistáin (1886-1959), launched, in January 1917, the Anti-Germanophile League, which was the perfect expression of the close correlation between the stance taken in the European war and in Spanish politics. The division of Spanish society into two large blocks was manifested in two meetings that both took place in the Plaza de Toros de Madrid. In exactly in the same scenario within the space of a month, Germanophile neutralists and pro-Entente interventionists attracted tens of thousands of people to their rallies. On 29 April, ten days after Manuel García Prieto (1859-1938), Marques de Alhucemas became president, Antonio Maura (1853-1925), who had never been a Germanophile, gathered about 20,000 people in an anti-Entente demonstration attended by all the conservative sectors. A month later, the left-wing, pro-Entente forces were mobilized in another rally which attracted about 25,000 people. Among the speakers were Alejandro Lerroux, the reformist Melquíades Álvarez (1864-1936) and Miguel de Unamuno. The event showed that the Allied cause and the Left were united. As Manuel Azaña had argued two days earlier in a conference on “The motives behind Germanophilia”, the equation was simple: only by joining forces with democracies could Spain itself be ready to become a democratic regime.

Political Crisis of the Restoration System

The latent tensions in the Restoration society could not be contained and the revolutionary and reactionary forces of the country eventually erupted. The triple crisis of the summer of 1917 laid bare the huge weight of the political and social impact of the war in Spain. Denied the chance to discuss the social and political consequences of the war in parliament, Catalanist sectors, led by Francesc Cambó, promoted a modernizing and democratizing alternative which, however, did not have the end of the monarchy as its central objective. His proposal – a kind of alternative parliament – consisted of an "Assembly of Parliamentarians" which convened for one day in Barcelona in July. It was forcefully suppressed, leaving the project substantially limited, and a new meeting was only possible weeks later. In response to this repression, the UGT and the CNT called a general strike in August with the aim of ending the monarchy. This time, the government's response was much harsher and the strike, despite constituting a genuine threat to the regime, ended in failure for the labour movement and with all its leaders in prison. While these events raged on, the *Juntas de Defensa Militar* (Military Defence Committees) kept a stranglehold on two consecutive governments.

The final months of the war gave rise to a genuine crisis for the regime of King Alfonso XIII. As in the continent as a whole, social conflicts grew exponentially after 1917. In this situation, there was a remarkable expansion of the CNT. Political radicalization became undeniable and added to the threat posed by the labour movement was the danger of a military dictatorship promoted from sectors close to the government through the figure of Juan de la Cierva (1864-1938). The government cabinets came and went during the last months of the war without achieving a minimum of stability to end the crisis. The central elements of this instability, which worsened in the following years, were increased social conflict – with focal points in Barcelona and the rural world of Andalusia – and the increase in Catalan demands that gave rise to a campaign in favour of autonomy that unfolded throughout Catalonia in January 1919. The end of the war did not end all of these processes. In fact, it left them completely unresolved and gave rise to a period marked by the crisis of the Restoration system that had begun shortly before the war and which the war had worsened considerably.

Conclusion

> "Even when all we Spaniards detest the revolutionary state, we find ourselves in it, and in it we shall continue for a long while by some force of social mechanics. One system of public equilibrium has, fortunately, been broken. The new system of public equilibrium has, unfortunately, not yet been achieved."

With these words, published in *El Sol* on 15 November 1918, Jose Ortega y Gasset captured the full extent of the situation in which Spain was mired at the end of the Great War. This intellectual from Madrid was correct in several respects. He showed that, despite the policy of neutrality, the "revolutionary state" that characterized the Europe of 1918 and 1919 was also expressed, with its own specific nuances, in Spain. He also made it clear that the "peaceful rotation" system that had characterized Spanish politics since 1875 was broken and he was correct in another fundamental

point: a new institutional balance had not yet been reached. This was probably the most important legacy of the Great War in Spain.

In Spain, as in Europe, criticism of the Restoration system, of parliamentarism and of liberalism gained the centre ground of politics in the years after 1918. In the heat of the complex development of the League of Nations and the Soviet experience, this found expression both in sectors close to Carlism and the right, as well as among the intellectuals linked to socialism and republicanism. It is in this context that we must understand the profound anti-parliamentarism that spread across the country after the failure of the Maura-led government in 1918 and subsequent successive power changes: between November 1918 and May 1920, the presidency was occupied by Prieto, Romanones, Maura, Sánchez de Toca, Allendesalazar and, once again, Dato. In some respects, the coup d'état led by Miguel de Primo de Rivera (1870-1930) in 1923 would put an end to this period. Other aspects of it would, nevertheless, be kept alive until the arrival of the Second Republic in 1931.

Maximiliano Fuentes Codera, Universitat de Girona

Section Editor: Carolina García Sanz

Notes

1. ↑ Vicens Vives, Jaume: Aproximación a la historia de España, Barcelona 1952.
2. ↑ García Sanz, Carolina / Fuentes Codera, Maximiliano: Toward New Approaches to Neutrality in the First World War: Rethinking the Spanish Case-study, in: Ruiz Sánchez, José Leonardo / Cordero Olivero, Inmaculada / García Sanz, Carolina: Shaping neutrality throughout the first world war, Seville 2016, pp. 39-62.
3. ↑ Cited from Almagro, Melchor Fernández: Historia del reinado de D. Alfonso XIII, Madrid 1986, pp. 207-208.
4. ↑ Alomar, Gabriel: Entorn del neutralisme, in: La Campana de Gracia (3 October 1914), p. 3.
5. ↑ Davant la guerra, in: La Veu de Catalunya (edición vespertina) (31 July 1914), p. 1.
6. ↑ Mousset, Albert: L'Espagne dans le conflit actuel, in: La Grande Revue (April 1915), p. 192.

Selected Bibliography

Botti, Alfonso: **Chiesa e cattolici spagnoli di fronte alla Grande guerra. Un sondaggio**, in: Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica 2015/1, 2015, pp. 111-129.

Esculies, Joan / Martínez Fiol, David: **12.000! Els catalans a la Primera Guerra Mundial**, Barcelona 2014: Ara Llibres.

Forcadell, Carlos: **Parlamentarismo y bolchevización. El movimiento obrero español, 1914-1918**, Barcelona 1978: Editorial Crítica.

Fuentes Codera, Maximiliano: **España en la Primera Guerra Mundial. Una movilización cultural**, Madrid 2014: Akal.

Fuentes Codera, Maximiliano (ed.): **La Gran Guerra de los intelectuales. España en Europa**, Revista Ayer, Madrid 2013: Marcial Pons Ediciones de Historia.

González Calleja, Eduardo / Aubert, Paul: **Nidos de espías. España, Francia y la Primera Guerra Mundial, 1914-1919**, Madrid 2014: Alianza.

Martorell Linares, Miguel Angel: **'No fue aquello solamente una guerra, fue una revolución'. España y la Primera Guerra Mundial**, in: Historia y Política 26, 2011, pp. 17-45.

Meaker, Gerald H.: **A civil war of words. The ideological impact of the First World War on Spain, 1914-1918**, in: Schmitt, Hans A. (ed.): Neutral Europe between war and revolution, 1917-23, Charlottesville 1988: University Press of Virginia, pp. 1-65.

Moreno Luzón, Javier: **The government parties and the king, 1913-23**, in: Romero Salvadó, Francisco J. / Smith, Angel (eds.): The agony of Spanish liberalism. From revolution to dictatorship 1913-23, Basingstoke; New York 2010: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 32-61.

Núñez Seixas, Xosé M.: **Internacionalitzant el nacionalisme. El catalanisme polític i la qüestió de les minories nacionals a Europa (1914-1936)**, Catarroja; Valencia 2010: Editorial Afers; Universitat de València.

Pla, Xavier / Fuentes Codera, Maximiliano / Montero, Francesc: **A civil war of words. The cultural impact of the Great War in Catalonia, Spain, Europe and a glance at Latin America**, Oxford 2016: Peter Lang.

Romero Salvadó, Francisco J.: **Spain 1914-1918. Between war and revolution**, London 1999: Routledge.

Romero Salvadó, Francisco J.: **The foundations of civil war. Revolution, social conflict and reaction in liberal Spain, 1916-1923**, New York; London 2008: Routledge; Cañada Blanch Centre for Contemporary Spanish Studies.

Ruiz Sánchez, José-Leonardo / Cordero Olivero, Inmaculada / García Sanz, Carolina (eds.): **Shaping neutrality throughout the First World War**, Seville 2016: Editorial Universidad de Sevilla.

Smith, Angel: **Anarchism, revolution, and reaction. Catalan labour and the crisis of the Spanish state, 1898-1923**, Oxford 2007: Berghahn.

Citation

Fuentes Codera, Maximiliano: Domestic Politics and Neutrality (Spain) , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2017-04-21. **DOI**: 10.15463/ie1418.11088.

License

Derivative Works.