

Film/Cinema (Spain)

By [Daniel Sánchez-Salas](#)

Summary

Spain's official neutrality during the First World War influenced the development of film distribution and exhibition in the country. The government's strategy to enforce neutrality was based on censorship, and applied to war films from both sides of the conflict. The country's internal instability was aggravated by the effects of the war and led to the central government's censorship activities, especially in late 1916. Despite this, the supporters of each side managed to make film exhibition a cultural battleground.

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Introduction

The First World War determined activity in the film industry in [Spain](#) throughout the period of conflict. Yet until today historians debate the extent to which the war influenced the film industry. What can be said is that both film distribution and exhibition were directly affected by the stance Spain adopted towards the global outbreak of war: [neutrality](#). The instrument used by the nation's government to enforce this [neutrality](#) was [censorship](#). Yet despite the fact that its application by the authorities had a day-to-day effect on public film screenings, nothing could prevent these screenings from becoming a sounding board for the increasingly conflictive situation [Spanish society](#) was going through. The grave political, economic and social crisis affecting the country during the war found one of its most characteristic expressions in the deep divide between Allied and German sympathisers. In a context of rising tensions, when "a performance of Wagner's *Lohengrin* in the Liceo opera house in Barcelona could give rise to loud hissing by Allied sympathisers before becoming a pitched battle,"¹ screening a [film](#) on the war could produce public demonstrations for or against its stance, or even skirmishes between film viewers with opposing views.

Censorship in the Face of Neutrality

Film censorship was common in belligerent countries during the First World War. But this was also true of countries who declared themselves to be neutral, as in the case of Spain. Just two days after war in Europe began, on 30 July 1914, the president of the country, [Eduardo Dato \(1856-1921\)](#), proclaimed Spain's neutrality. At that time, film censorship by the state had been in place in the country for nearly two years.² There is no record of whether specific film censorship legislation was introduced because of the outbreak of war. The matter was resolved by applying the procedure already in place for every kind of film; this was supervised by the civil authorities in each province, with the assistance, in theory, of a commission. It was not until December 1916 that a Royal Order of the Ministry of the Interior (Ministerio de la Gobernación) cited the need to exercise film censorship in order not to offend "the Sovereigns of friendly nations or their armies."³ The Royal Order referred to cinema as part of a broader reminder to apply censorship to the [press](#) and to exhibitions of paintings and drawings.

Given this state of affairs, the implementation of censorship was subject to great local idiosyncrasy from the beginning. Civil authorities had to interpret regulation, which, as we have seen, was not written until well into the war, and even then, in a very imprecise manner. As a result, these authorities had to decide what it meant to respect neutrality. At the same time, these governments did not always exercise censorship before a film's release, but instead acted after the fact. Thus, the field was left open to arbitrary measures. The beginning of the war led some, but not all, civil authorities to prohibit the viewing of any film dealing with the war. Municipal authorities in cities such as San Sebastián and Tarrasa began doing so as early as September 1914. But this kind of absolute interdiction by provincial authorities ceased to be very common as the war advanced. In some provinces, the showing of films by one side or another was prohibited for a specific period of time, as was the case in Madrid with respect to German films in March 1915. But it was more common to carry out censorship on individual films. This did not always involve going into details or basing the action on precise criteria with respect to the film's content. In October 1914 the governor of Tarragon, for example, did not lift his complete prohibition of films about the war, defined by his own standard. He did, however, lift the prohibition of films which had previously been permitted by the civil authorities in Barcelona. Similarly, sometimes a film approved for exhibition in one province would be prohibited in another. Just one example of this was in 1915 when a few German films which had been approved in Cádiz and Jerez de la Frontera were prohibited in Salamanca and Valladolid. Nor did a case-by-case approach always involve prior censorship, whether because of the laxity of the government of the day or the lack of resources to carry out a task of no doubt vast proportions. Thus fines or the

withdrawal of films already being exhibited were the censor's usual tools.

The peculiar mechanics of censorship became a real problem for film companies. Beginning in early 1915, distributors began to complain, about prior censorship, because it delayed the release of new films, brought additional costs and gave rise to a "constant waste of time with decrees and meetings to discuss matters and the things to be censored."⁴ As time passed, far from improving, the situation worsened. The most critical period was between late 1916 and early 1917. Whereas in December 1916 the Royal Order had reminded authorities of the obligation to carry out censorship of public activities such as film exhibition in the face of evidence that civil governments were not carrying this out with sufficient vigilance, in January 1917 the Ministry of the Interior prohibited the public exhibition of any kind of film relating to the war. This decision undoubtedly had to do with the difficulties the president of the country, [Álvaro Figueroa, Count of Romanones \(1863-1950\)](#) was experiencing at the time. His pressure in favour of the Allies at a time when the possibility of Spain abandoning its neutrality was back on the table had brought about a relentless campaign against him by German-sympathising elements. This included an increase in film [propaganda](#). The prohibition of film propaganda in general was just one of Romanones' strategies for halting the attack on him in the most covert manner possible, without formally breaking with neutrality. In truth, however, this total prohibition did not slow the screening of propaganda films. Although it succeeded in reducing the number of films shown in commercial exhibition circuits, it fostered screenings taking place under the umbrella of so-called private exhibition.

Between Information and Propaganda

From the start to the end of the war Spanish film censorship constantly had to struggle with the ambiguity that reigned when distinguishing between information and [propaganda](#). This ambiguity arose not only from the original qualities of the films themselves, but also from the time and place they were exhibited or proposed to be exhibited. During the war newsreels from French companies, particularly Pathé and Gaumont, as well as the German company Messter, were shown on Spanish screens, but also other kinds of materials, mostly feature films, generated by the countries at war as the conflict progressed. Although the outbreak of war coincided in Spain with the exhibition of fiction films such as the well-known Belgian "pacifist" [film](#) *Maudite soit la guerre* (*War is Hell*, Alfred Machin, 1914), I refer here mostly to non-fiction films which did not share the brevity of the newsreel. Despite being distributed under the label information, the logic of these films was clearly propagandistic, such as the famous [The Battle of the Somme](#) (Geoffrey Malins and John McDowell, 1916), shown in Spain from late 1916 onwards.

This kind of film, and in general any film relating to the war, presented the censor with a

complex task, by virtue of both the nature of these films and the country's instability. Spain's status as a "shelter" for foreign capital did not overcome an economic crisis which predated the war. This newly arrived money and that generated by exports remained in the hands of a few, while the population suffered the effects of runaway inflation and severe shortages caused by the war. Popular discontent rose in 1917 with the effect that the [Russian Revolution](#) had on the Spanish workers' movement. The social situation became increasingly explosive, and Spanish cinemas became places where this discontent was manifested, frequently in the form of clashes between Allied and German sympathisers. Both newsreels and propaganda films were susceptible to the fanning of flames between movie viewers, who called out in favour of one side or the other, threatened cinemas that showed films by the enemy, and even came to blows. Newspapers of the day reported altercations in cinemas in cities such as Cádiz, Seville, Valencia and Barcelona. And the censor cited the risk of disorder as one of the main excuses for not authorising films. The governor of Zaragoza, for example, justified the prohibition of a series of [German films](#) in November 1916 with the comment that they "could provoke the warring parties and their respective supporters."⁵ A few theatre owners even pleaded with audiences in advertisements for their programs to abstain from making comments during screenings: the owner of a cinema in Gijón, for example, did so in May 1915 before a screening of the film *Los nueve países en guerra* (*The Nine Countries at War*).

In fact it is not possible adequately to interpret film activity during this period in Spain without an understanding that its cinemas comprised yet another aspect of the propaganda war between the two sides. From late 1915 to early 1916, first [France](#) and then [Germany](#) and [England](#) became aware of the usefulness of film propaganda. This translated, among other things, into increased production and as such, an increase in the materials made available by propaganda bureaus for distribution in other countries in order to win the public opinion battle. There was intense activity in Spain in this field; much of it was secret and run by the German,⁶ French and British propaganda services. The period between late 1916 and the first half of 1917 was particularly active. The clash between the constant propaganda efforts of the two sides and Spanish film censorship gave rise to different exhibition models.

Private Exhibition Models

As mentioned above, Spanish legislation established film censorship on public screenings, which in most cases meant commercial film exhibition. As a result, organisers of screenings in support of the warring parties presented them as private, with admission by invitation. These invitations did not fail to mention the charitable or humanitarian nature of the event, in order to make clear that it had no political and thus no propagandistic aims which would run

up against the country's neutrality. These subterfuges did not always exempt these private screenings from the censor's actions. But there was less repression of such events than there was of officially public screenings.

Among these private screenings, the most common model was the charitable event in a cinema usually used for commercial exhibition. It was thus necessary for the organisers of the propaganda activity to come to an agreement with the owners of these cinemas in order to hold their event there. There were also representatives in Spain of the film companies of foreign countries who organised this kind of event, in favour of their countries' war efforts. This was the case of Madame Garnier, who had taken on the representation of Pathé in Spain and [Portugal](#), no less, when her husband Louis Garnier was recruited. In the benefit screenings for the French front she organised we find the varied audience which frequently attended these events: national and local authorities, distinguished representatives of the foreign community to which the screening was devoted, and regular members of the public. With respect to the kinds of films shown at such events, non-fiction propaganda films in their various newsreel and feature-length forms usually made up part or all of the program. Some of the proceeds went to charitable associations in the country concerned, while the various national sections of the Red Cross were the principal beneficiaries. Screenings to raise funds for the [Red Cross](#) were held throughout the country, and it was customary that these were organised by the support groups and propaganda services of the countries involved in the war. These screenings thus became a fundamental tool in the propaganda war on Spanish soil between the warring countries; in this propaganda war there was no lack of effort to mount screenings where the opposing group had held their own, or to camouflage propaganda films amongst other films to avoid censorship by the authorities.

These propaganda services also appear to have been connected with the second model of private screenings, those organised by support groups. Such groups took the form of things such as friendship societies between Spain and the country being supported. They organised different kinds of activities, including frequent film screenings, on occasion accompanied by a guest lecturer who was sometimes a foreigner. The event could be publicised under the feint of it being humanitarian or even medical or scientific in nature as a safeguard against censorship, which did not have a clear policy regarding these kinds of screenings. Among the audience it was customary to see Spanish dignitaries or dignitaries from the combatant country. But there was also a broader public, although it was limited to the sympathisers of one faction or the other. The "Cercle Interallié de Propagande Cinématographique," located in Madrid and popularly known as the *Círculo Francés* or *Amigos de Francia*, stands out for both its longevity, from late 1916 until the end of the war, and its intense activity. It rented one of the main theatres in the city for its activities, the Teatro Benavente. There it mounted weekly programs of films on the war which were advertised as informative; these were not

only French but also from the other main Allied powers, England and [Italy](#). An example is that of the well-known priest and journalist [Ernesto Vercesi \(1873-1936\)](#) who, while discussing the work of priests in the military, praised the military alliance between Italy, France and [Belgium](#) before showing two films on the harsh fighting conditions in the mountains of Italy.

A third model of private screenings was much more limited in terms of its access to viewers. These were held in luxury hotels, private homes of the upper class and even embassies. This may be the only one of the three models we can say for certain was truly private. And beyond the simple propagandistic aim, we can see in this kind of exhibition the game of power playing out in the upper echelons of society. Spanish politicians at the highest level, diplomats, aristocrats and notable social and cultural figures made up the usual audience for these screenings. This was the case at events held at the British Embassy in Madrid. Sir [Arthur Hardinge \(1859-1933\)](#) and his wife, Lady Alexandra Hardinge, presented various film screenings between, at a minimum, the fall of 1916 and the spring of 1917. Among the films screened was, once again, *The Battle of the Somme* in December 1916, significantly during the same period as it was shown in the Circulo Francés. Other screenings presented films on the Battle of the Ancre, a [Zeppelin](#) crash and British women working in a munitions factory. Among the audience attending these screenings were the ambassadors of countries such as France and Argentina; diplomats from Italy, Portugal, [The Netherlands](#), [Sweden](#), [Brazil](#) and [Japan](#); former Spanish president Eduardo Dato; various Spanish cabinet ministers; distinguished members of the Spanish aristocracy; and famous writers of the day. In this light, we can view such screenings as not only acts to reassert the views of the Allied camp around the novelty of an informative film arrived from England. We might wonder to what extent they were also a form of pressure through film screenings on those present, such as many of the Spanish aristocrats and politicians who viewed the Central European powers more benevolently.

Conclusion

In short, film exhibition in Spain was one more space where the hard-fought battle between the influence of the Great War and official neutrality was waged. In fact this battle was several battles: that of information against war propaganda; that of propaganda against censorship; and that of the Spanish amongst themselves, with clashes between Allied and German supporters. The clear fissures in film censorship, carrying out its task arbitrarily, represent the fissures in government policy with respect to the war, a policy which had to fight against a divided society in upheaval. The gradual appearance of film screenings on the censor's legislative radar in those years demonstrates how, for Spanish political authorities, the cinema obtained its birthright as an influential communications medium, and as such became something that had to be controlled. Film's growing importance in Spain in the eyes

of both the Allied powers and the Central European [empires](#) only confirms this point. Each side, in its pitched battle to win over Spanish public opinion, came to develop different modes of film exhibition with the goal of getting around government censorship and carrying out its propaganda activities.

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Notes

1. Fuentes Codera, Maximiliano: España en la Primera Guerra Mundial: Una movilización cultural Madrid 2014, pp. 62-63. [↑](#)
2. Film censorship legislation was introduced in Spain on 27 November 1912 by Royal Order (R.O.) of the Ministry of the Interior (Ministerio de la Gobernación). This legislation prohibited children from attending film screenings unaccompanied because of the potentially indecent and immoral nature of the entertainment. It also required that film scripts be submitted prior to production to civil governments and city councils, which were assisted in their supervisory work by members of institutions such as child protection councils. [↑](#)
3. Royal Order of 6 December 1916, quoted in Folgar De La Calle, José María: El espectáculo cinematográfico en Galicia 1896-1920, Santiago de Compostela 1987, p. 127. [↑](#)
4. Ribas Velázquez, Iolanda: El papel de la distribución en Cataluña durante la Primera Guerra Mundial, in: Lahoz Rodrigo, Juan Ignacio (ed.): A propósito de Cuesta: Escritos sobre los comienzos del cine español (1896-1920), Valencia 2010, p. 409. [↑](#)
5. Correspondence between the governor and the minister of the interior, reproduced in Albes, Jens: La propaganda cinematográfica de los alemanes en España durante la Primera Guerra Mundial, in: Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez 31/3 (1995), p. 87. [↑](#)
6. German activity with respect to cinema on Spanish territory is described in detail in the excellent research by Jens Albes quoted above. This text uses archives of diplomatic documents as its principal source. [↑](#)
7. Daniel Sánchez-Salas has joined the research programme HAR2015-66262-P. [↑](#)

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- [Albes, Jens: La propaganda cinematográfica de los alemanes en España durante la Primera Guerra Mundial](#), in: *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* 31/3, 1995, pp. 77-101 (Persée) (Article)
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