

Foreign Policy (Spain)

By [José Antonio Montero Jiménez](#)

Summary

Throughout the Great War, successive Spanish governments tried to advance traditional foreign policy claims – the annexation of Tangier, the return of Gibraltar and the possibility of intervening in Portugal – while at the same time facing the economic, political and social threats derived from internal instability and the indirect effects of the conflict. Spain always navigated a difficult balance between the temptation of exercising a benevolent neutrality towards its traditional European partners – France and Great Britain – and the need to reduce the harmful consequences of German submarine activity.

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Introduction

There have been few historical studies on the important aspects of Spanish foreign policy during the First World War. Traditionally, Spanish scholars have neglected their country's role in the war, focusing instead on internal issues, such as the disintegration of the Spanish liberal monarchy;¹ the effects of the conflict on the national economy;² and the progressive polarization of the country into two blocs that ended up fighting a civil war.³ The earliest, albeit partial, accounts of the Spanish government's dealings with the belligerent powers date back to the war years and were for the most part of a propagandistic or laudatory nature.⁴ In the past twenty years, new approaches to the role of European [neutrals](#) have

resulted in studies of [Spain](#)'s attitudes towards the conflict from different angles:⁵ relations with countries such as [France](#) and the [United States](#);⁶ regional studies centred around regions of strategic or economic value;⁷ and pioneering analyses on the belligerents' secret and [propaganda](#) services.⁸ These new insights have led to a reinterpretation of the connection between internal and foreign affairs in general, as well as the attitudes to war of influential groups such as intellectuals, politicians and [journalists](#).⁹

Spanish Foreign Policy, 1898-1914

After its defeat in the war against the United States in 1898, Spain did its best to find an international guarantor for its few remaining possessions outside the Iberian Peninsula – the Balearic and Canary Islands, as well as Ceuta and Melilla in North Africa. This led the country to associate itself with the Franco-British Entente through an agreement with France in 1904 by which both countries divided up the Moroccan sultanate as a preliminary step towards the future establishment of a Franco-Spanish protectorate. Three years later Spain concluded the Cartagena agreements with France and England, which included a general compromise on territorial stability in the Mediterranean. Over time, the Madrid governments ended up seeing the colonization of the North African sultanate as their last opportunity to improve their image internationally. Those ambitions coincided with the disappointment that accompanied the final establishment in 1912 of the Franco-Spanish protectorate in [Morocco](#). Spain, who had long ago seen its ambitions over the city of Tangier vanish, tried to resist France's demands for further reductions of its zone, by appealing (unsuccessfully), to England. Spanish resentment against [Great Britain](#) had also increased since 1910, when the Portuguese monarchy had been overthrown, raising fears that [Alfonso XIII, King of Spain \(1886-1941\)](#) could share the same destiny. Since then, the king had been contemplating military intervention in [Portugal](#), something that England, Lisbon's traditional ally, would never allow.¹⁰

Between 1912 and 1914, some voices in official circles began seeing the connection with France and Great Britain as a hindrance to Spain's international ambitions.¹¹ But every new move had to take into account the international economic position of the nation, which depended on foreign goods and capital coming, mostly, from its Entente partners. When the war broke out in Europe, Spain was therefore ready to take advantage of every opportunity to advance some of its unfulfilled claims: Tangier, Portugal and Gibraltar. All this occurred in the middle of deepening political instability. Between August 1914 and November 1918, the king appointed seven consecutive cabinets all of which were unable to pass even the annual budget through parliament.

Assessing the Reality of the War (1914-1917)

The Beginning of the Conflict

Although Prime Minister [Eduardo Dato \(1856-1921\)](#) rushed to proclaim [neutrality](#) on 7 August 1914, the government, some opposition leaders, and the king did not resign themselves to playing a passive role in the conflict. A few days earlier, in a letter to Alfonso XIII, Dato had talked about “possible requirements” that could end up forcing Spain to intervene.¹² On 19 August, the Liberal leader, [Álvaro de Figueroa, Count Romanones \(1863-1950\)](#) anonymously published in his *Diario Universal* a famous article titled “Neutralities that Kill”, calling to “let England and France know that we are with them”.¹³ That month, the king expressed his regret to the French ambassador that he was “the head of a country too weak to engage in the war,”¹⁴ and said to the American ambassador that “his personal intuition was to take part in the struggle.”¹⁵ Throughout 1914 and 1915, the government and Alfonso XIII had talks with representatives of both sides to assess what Spain could expect from them if it decided to exercise a benevolent neutrality. In October 1914, when there were still hopes that [Germany](#) could gain an easy victory, Berlin offered Spain Tangier, Gibraltar and a free hand in Portugal should Madrid refrain from helping the Allies in any way.¹⁶ Correspondingly, in early 1915, the Spanish government tried to negotiate with Britain the future incorporation of Tangier if the Entente won.¹⁷

1916: Pressures from Both Sides

As 1915 continued, with neither side gaining significant advantage in the conflict, the Entente and the Central Powers began preparing for a longer and [total war](#). They devised new schemes that greatly affected life in neutral countries. In 1916, Germany began to deploy its [submarines](#) in the Mediterranean, at the same time plotting to use certain Spanish ports as secret points for supplies, or for conveying information to its U-boats.¹⁸ At the same time, in an effort to reduce trade between Spain and the Allies, German submarines began, with renewed impetus, destroying Spanish merchant vessels: from March to December 1916, they sank fifteen ships, amounting to 33,000 metric tons.¹⁹ As a response, the Allies modified their [blockade systems](#) to impede neutral trade with Germany. They not only used a blacklist and embargoes, but also tried to get rid of German competitors in neutral markets, to the point of punishing all neutral firms or individuals doing business with them.²⁰

Spain did its best to resist this new wave of belligerents’ interference in its internal affairs. After the German U-35 visited the port of Cadiz in June 1916, the Allies began pressing

Madrid to ban the entrance of all submarines to Spanish ports. Should Spain acquiesce, Germany would surely retaliate, increasing its attacks against Spanish merchant vessels, whose owners were already threatening to cease operations until the government found a way to protect them effectively. Madrid first attempted to launch a concerted action with the United States with a view to outlining a clear policy towards the visits of German submarines, and to try to force Berlin to stop attacking neutral tonnage.²¹ Having failed, the Spanish government, led by Count Romanones, approached Great Britain and France in search of support, and compensation in Morocco after the war, in return for a more benevolent stance or even a severance of German-Spanish relations. In September 1916, Romanones met secretly with [Jules Cambon \(1845-1935\)](#) – then a high-ranking officer in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs – and [Stephan Pichon \(1857-1933\)](#), former and future minister of foreign affairs, who acted as unofficial envoy from the [French government](#). Though Pichon seemed open to Spanish demands, and eager to have Spain side with the Entente, there was not much Romanones could do to change his country's position. In late 1916, the Germans orchestrated a full-blown [press campaign](#), accusing him of profiting from the war to improve his finances, and forcing him to resign in April 1917.²²

Spain also achieved limited results in its struggle to face the economic burdens of the war. Early in the conflict, Spaniards turned to the United States as an alternative source of supply. The Madrid government eased the legal and financial barriers affecting U.S./Spanish trade, and American imports into Spain rose from 153 million *pesetas* in 1914, to 399 million in 1916. This made the U.S. Spain's main supplier, a position it would maintain well into the twentieth century. Nevertheless, imports from the Entente powers, and particularly from Great Britain, also increased in value, pointing to the fact that Spain still depended on them for obtaining certain vital goods, especially coal.²³ The new trade regulations imposed by the Allies, the growing scarcity of basic supplies in Spain and the decimating of merchant marine convinced Madrid to negotiate a new kind of commercial agreement with the Allies. The so-called Cortina agreement with Great Britain contemplated the exchange of Spanish iron for British coal. It was concluded early in 1917, though it would never become effective, due to the deepening political crisis in Spain. When 1916 came to an end, the huge balance of trade benefits Spain had been making since 1914 seemed at stake.²⁴

A Strategy of Survival, 1917-1918

Spain and the Allies' Economic Warfare

The fall of Count Romanones coincided with the outbreak of the Spanish political crisis of 1917, one of the gravest in the country's recent history. At the same time, the entrance of

the United States into the war in April of that year strengthened the Allies' leverage over neutral countries. The Entente powers had already attempted to organize their economic activities in Spain, so as to avoid direct competition among them. This process came to its zenith during the Inter-Allied Economic Conference that took place at Paris in late 1917, in which the Allies agreed to coordinate their purchases in Spain and to try to force Spain to put some of its merchant tonnage and its financing capabilities at their service. This time, France and England counted on the series of embargoes that, between July 1917 and January 1918, the United States put on exports to the Iberian Peninsula – mostly on coal, [oil](#) and cotton – whose absence could but increase the social turmoil that engulfed the country. The Americans made the Spanish government know that the issuance of licences for the export of those products would in the future depend on accepting certain conditions. On 7 March 1918, the Spanish government signed agreements with France and the United States agreeing, in exchange for fixed quantities of oil and cotton, to sell them foodstuffs, canvas, soap, leather products and other equipment, as well as limited quantities of wool, pyrites, lead, zinc and copper, some of which were scarce in Spain. At the same time, to finance its purchases, Madrid had to press Spanish bankers into extending credits, first to France, and then, in August, to America. The March and August agreements did not bring Spain as much relief as it expected. The agreement did not prevent Spanish imports of cotton and oil from being, in 1918, considerably inferior to those in 1917. That year Spain had bought 191,689 pounds of cotton and 8,323 gallons of oil, which dwindled to 122,197 pounds and 6,836 gallons in 1918.²⁵

Submarines and the Crisis of August-October 1918

The Entente powers and the United States also took a harder stance towards the activities of German submarines near the Spanish coasts. Following the spectacular escape of the U-293 from the port of Cadiz on 9 September 1917, where it was interned, the United States for the first time joined France, England and [Italy](#) in a common diplomatic protest urging the internment of all German ships in Spanish ports. The Madrid government was also soon confronted with a new wave of submarine attacks on Spanish ships. Between July 1915 and early June 1918, German U-boats sank fifty-seven Spanish merchant vessels – 22 percent of the total. Somewhat surprisingly, the coalition government, presided over by the elderly Conservative leader, [Antonio Maura \(1853-1925\)](#), announced on 10 August that it would seize one German merchant ship anchored in Iberian ports for each Spanish vessel sunk by a submarine. When on 30 August Maura ordered the seizing of a German vessel, Berlin's response was to state that it would consider such an action as a reason for war.

For the first time in four years, the Spanish government faced the real possibility of entering the war. The minister of state, Eduardo Dato, began a series of consultations with Paris,

London and Washington, asking what help Spain could expect from the Allies if war broke out with Germany, and whether it could hope for compensation in Morocco. Though France seemed sympathetic at first, the British considered that Spain would be less useful to their cause as a belligerent they would have to protect, than as a neutral provider of products important for the war effort. The final decision was taken over the objections of the American ambassador, [Joseph Willard \(1865-1924\)](#), who remained determined to encourage Spain to break relations with Berlin. The Entente had to appeal directly to President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#), and on 5 October the secretary of state ordered Willard to follow in the steps of the rest of the Allies: they would congratulate Spain for having finally decided to oppose German actions, but would do nothing to push the Spanish government towards a declaration of war. On this occasion, they concurred with the Spanish king who, overwhelmed by the recent 1917 crisis and the [overthrow of the Russian tsar](#), was afraid that entrance would be tantamount to revolution. The Spanish government saw no option but to negotiate directly with Berlin some kind of compensation for its tonnage losses: in late October 1918, Germany agreed to transfer seven ships to Spain. When the armistice came into force on 11 November 1918, the Spanish government was still trying to obtain greater compensation from Berlin.²⁶

Conclusion

Shortly after the signing of the armistice, Count Romanones, given his credentials as the most pro-Allied Spanish politician, again became head of the Spanish government. In an unprecedented move, he travelled to Paris to meet President Wilson on 20 December 1918, to present to him Spain's hopes for the new world order. He wanted compensation for the loss of merchant shipping at the hands of German submarines; Spanish participation in the [Versailles](#) negotiations and the drafting of the Covenant of the [League of Nations](#); and a greater Spanish presence in Morocco. Though Romanones cabled the king that, "the conversation with Wilson has been extremely interesting and cordial to the utmost",²⁷ the truth was that the American president (like the other Allied leaders at Versailles), did not pay much attention to the points raised by the Spaniard. When the [Paris Conference](#) ended in 1919, Spanish foreign policy was at the same point it was in 1914, but with one clear difference: Germany could never be used as a counterbalance to those French and British claims that went against Spain's deepest dreams and interests.

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