

Historiography 1918-Today (Spain)

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Summary

This article examines the evolution of the Spanish historiography of the First World War, highlighting its initial neglect and gradual integration of broader European historiographical trends. Spanish scholarship has diversified, focusing on diplomatic, economic, cultural, and political aspects of Spain's neutrality. The work of contemporary historians, including studies on propaganda, espionage, and social mobilisation, has placed Spain at the centre of a global conflict, moving beyond the traditional view of its neutrality as passive. Future challenges involve further transnational research.

Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 From the Post-War Years to Franco](#)
- [3 After 1975](#)
- [4 The New Cultural and Political History](#)
- [5 Current and Future Debates](#)
- [6 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

Until the arrival of the 21st century, [Spain's neutrality](#) during the First World War was a minor historiographical concern in Spanish historiography. In this sense, the trend in Spanish historiography was paradigmatic of the historiographies of [neutral](#) countries, which have paid less attention to the Great War than those from belligerent countries. This historiographical delay was also a consequence of the Franco regime, a period in which contemporary Spanish history was interpreted with suspicion. The few works that addressed the beginning of the 20th century, and particularly the Great War, prioritised a diplomatic perspective and [economic](#) analysis. Since the end of Francoism, however, and especially in recent decades, approaches have diversified, new questions have arisen, and a move towards alignment with other European historiographies has begun. The challenge of contributing to transnational debates and arguments has encouraged a growing number of researchers to delve deeper

into Spain's relationship with the Great War.

From the Post-War Years to Franco

The first works about Spain's relationship to the First World War, or *guerra europea* as it was then called in Spain, issued by Spanish publishers or written by Spanish authors, were not historiographical works. They were essays and opinion books inseparable from the intellectual controversy between the pro-Allied and pro-German groups. In fact, the [propaganda](#) services of the contending countries sometimes provided financial support for the publication of these works. Some examples were the works of [Álvaro Alcalá-Galiano \(1873-1936\)](#),¹ [Martín Lorenzo Coria \(1861-1918\)](#),² Francisco Anaya Ruiz,³ and [Hermógenes Cenamor Val \(1892-1939\)](#).⁴ After the end of the war, apart from works on the post-war world order aimed at an educated audience, there was a shift in focus towards works that reflected on Spain's place in the new international system of the [League of Nations](#). With the aim of legitimising and defending the monarchy in a context of crisis for the Restoration system, some publications recalled the role of [King Alfonso XIII \(1886-1941\)](#) in promoting the European War Office, a celebrated [humanitarian](#) initiative.⁵ During the Second Republic (1931-1936/39), despite the fact that many of the intellectuals who had fuelled the controversy in 1914-1918 by engaging in pro-Allied activism, such as [Manuel Azaña Díaz \(1880-1940\)](#), went on to assume political responsibilities, reflections on the link between neutral Spain and European reality in those years of war were generally limited to specific observations in works summarising Spanish history.⁶

After the Civil War and the establishment of Franco's regime throughout the country in 1939, Spanish historiography, like all academic and artistic production, was muzzled. Although this was a trend that predated the dictatorship, historiographical production during those years prioritised studies on medieval Castile and the Spanish monarchy in the 15th to 18th centuries, often with reductionist approaches and an intention to extol national glories. Due to a general interpretative mistrust of contemporary events, the Great War aroused little interest and was not the subject of any monographs, appearing only in general histories of Spain such as those by [Eduardo Aunós \(1894-1967\)](#).⁷ Only the importation of the ideas of the Annales School by [Jaume Vicens Vives \(1910-1960\)](#) breathed some hope of renewal into the Spanish historiographical landscape. Concern for social and economic issues, from a non-Marxist and non-rebellious perspective, gradually gained ground. In relation to studies on the impact of the Great War in Spain, the work of historian [Juan Antonio Lacomba \(1938-2017\)](#) stands out. In the late 1960s, he focused some of his studies on the crisis of 1917 and the economic consequences of the "European war."⁸ Outside Spain, authors such as Lilian Gelos de Vaz

Ferreira also shed light on Spain's policy of neutrality and Spanish-German relations, making intensive and rigorous use of diplomatic sources.⁹ However, the paradigms and questions remained limited.

In 1973, literary historian [Fernando Díaz-Plaja \(1918-2012\)](#) published the book *Francófilos y germanófilos*, which, despite being based on the reproduction and criticism of some texts that appeared in the [Spanish press](#) during the Great War and far removed from current European terms of reference, warned of the ideological division and intellectual controversy that had existed in Spain between pro-Allied and pro-German supporters.¹⁰ Although the subject matter was well known and had even been covered in literary texts and films, this text raised greater awareness of this division and of the need to move towards new interpretations of the impact of the Great War on Spain with a focus on its cultural aspects.

After 1975

The death of General Franco in 1975 and the transition to democracy served as the backdrop for a rapid renewal of historiography. A new generation of historians with new political and intellectual concerns emerged, often drawing on Marxist ideas to reinterpret the country's contemporary history. In this context, some works focused closely on the labour movement and the revolutionary left in Spain and their relationship with the war. From Stanford University in the United States, [Gerald H. Meaker \(1926-2012\)](#) published a seminal work, *The Revolutionary Left in Spain: 1914-1923*, which explained the relationship between the world war and the social and political crisis from a Marxist perspective, drawing a dividing line between the authorities and economic groups on the one hand and Spanish society as a whole on the other.¹¹ In 1988, in a work edited by [Hans A. Schmitt \(1921-2006\)](#) on the impact of the war on neutral European countries, Meaker expanded on his interpretations, offering a rich overview of Spain's relationship to the Great War, which also included political and cultural perspectives.¹² Meanwhile, in the 1980s, French Hispanist [Paul Aubert \(1948-\)](#), drawing on extensive French diplomatic documentation, revealed the interference of foreign powers in Spanish public opinion through subsidies to the press and the dissemination of propaganda.¹³ [Ron M. Carden \(1942-\)](#) contributed a highly detailed and well-researched study on the diplomatic and commercial interests of the German Empire and German [espionage in Spain](#) in a context of increasingly complex cultural and diplomatic relations involving neutral countries.¹⁴ A few years later, [Jens Albes](#) published another extraordinarily rigorous work on German espionage and German propaganda in Spain.¹⁵ Thus, the ideological controversy between pro-Allied and pro-German factions, which had been the subject of some studies, was shown to have been fuelled by the interests of the Great Powers.

In this era of intellectual and historiographical openness during the young Spanish democracy, Catalan historiography contributed reference works on the origins and development of political Catalanism. Some historians, such as [Enric Ucelay-Da Cal \(1948-\)](#), were particularly interested in the connection between Catalanism and the foreign context. In this regard, Ucelay-Da Cal also addressed the reception of [Wilsonianism](#) in Catalan [nationalism](#),¹⁶ while one of his disciples, [David Martínez Fiol \(1962-\)](#), delved into the definition of an initial strategy for the international projection of Catalan nationalism in the heat of the Great War and the rhetoric surrounding the rights of national minorities.¹⁷ Martínez Fiol also shed light on the nationalist myth of the 12,000 Catalan [volunteers](#) in the First World War, linking it to the search for recognition abroad in line with other nationalist movements in Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁸

The New Cultural and Political History

In the early 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet system shattered confidence in historical materialism as the dominant paradigm. In fact, many voices had already been calling for a shift in historiography and for greater emphasis on cultural and symbolic factors in understanding the dynamics of the past and the causes of historical changes and ruptures. For studies on the First World War, the first nucleus of change was in [France](#), particularly in Péronne, led by authors such as [Stéphane Audoin Rouzeau](#) and [Annette Becker](#), who were interested in cultural representations of the war. In Spain, the culturalist historiographical renewal did not unequivocally translate into greater attention to the impact of the First World War until the dawn of the 2010s, although some works on Spanish-French cultural relations highlighted the importance of the war and cultural missions in revitalising those relations.¹⁹ In the Spanish case, a new political and cultural history would only gradually be defined around neutral Spain, dialoguing and intertwining with each other in a completely normal way. In this regard, in 1999, historian [Francisco José Romero-Salvadó \(1962\)](#) published *España 1914-1918: entre la guerra y la revolución*, a bridging work that renewed the state of knowledge.²⁰ Romero-Salvadó's analysis was based on some key aspects of the interpretative theses of Gerald H. Meaker, but Romero-Salvadó addressed the complex diplomatic contacts between Spain and the Allied countries through intensive consultation of the British Foreign Office archives in Kew. In that work, Romero brilliantly reconstructed the political, military, and social situation in Spain in the 1910s and the way in which the different elements connected, spurred on by the war in Europe.

From 2014 onwards, in the context of a publishing boom on the [centenary](#) of the outbreak of

the Great War, new works brought Spanish historiographical production in line with that of other countries. In this regard, historians [Eduardo González Calleja \(1962-\)](#), Paul Aubert, and Fernando García Sanz made decisive contributions by investigating the scope of the espionage, propaganda and clandestine trade networks that the belligerent powers deployed in Spanish territory.²¹ Along the same lines, Carolina García Sanz provided highly revealing information about the Allied secret services in the Gibraltar area.²² These works, drawing on rich diplomatic and police sources, placed neutral Spain as a field of conflict and dispute, helping to definitively dismantle, with rigorous documentation, the idea that Spain had remained isolated thanks to its neutrality. During those years of historiographical ferment, several major works on the Spanish crisis of 1917,²³ as well as new studies on Catalan volunteers in the French Foreign Legion and attacks on the Spanish merchant navy,²⁴ helped to shed light on the impact of the war on the country. Furthermore, during those years, several conferences brought together highly renowned specialists, highlighting the fact that the issue of Spain and the Great War was of utmost topicality and historiographical interest.²⁵

At the same time, driven by the centenary of the Great War and with the accumulated baggage of other international historiographies on the war that had adopted culturalist paradigms earlier, the cultural element also gained weight in Spanish historiography. In this sense, intellectual debates on the regeneration of Spain and the division between pro-Allied and pro-German factions became a significant topic, especially thanks to the work of historian [Maximiliano Fuentes Codera](#). From his early works on the writer [Eugeni d'Ors \(1881-1954\)](#), Fuentes Codera adopted a transnational focus and an extraordinary attention to the most novel questions and trends.²⁶ Fuentes Codera's works portrayed the intellectual not as a passive actor isolated from social reality, but on the front line of battle as a combatant in a civil war fought with the pen and the word.²⁷ In the mid-2010s, thanks to the constant emergence of new studies, it became clear that the Great War not only shook the Spanish political establishment and economic situation, but also led to a cultural mobilisation in neutral Spain similar to that of other European societies. Following interest in the cultural approach to the Great War, other works focused on the national and regional press,²⁸ specific political cultures,²⁹ and the actions of specific intellectual actors such as [Ramiro de Maeztu \(1874-1936\)](#).³⁰ The complementarity of these new perspectives became evident with the appearance of works that combined an approach to the cultural representations of the Great War made by contemporary Spaniards with the effects of the conflict on local and regional politics. In this regard, the research of Alejandro Pulido Azpíroz and José Luis Agudín Menéndez on the impact of the war on two regions in northern Spain, the Basque Country

and Asturias, stood out.³¹

Current and Future Debates

If the 2010s represented a clear attempt to bring Spanish historiographical production in line with that of other European benchmarks, the last few years of the 2020s are demonstrating the full integration of Spanish historiography with the most current global historiographical concerns. In this sense, without neglecting cultural perspectives, current historiographical challenges have involved integrating a gender perspective and demonstrating the transnational dimension of research on the effects of war in neutral Spain. Thanks to the young researcher Berta Adelina Lillo Gutiérrez, we now recognise the representations of neutrality and the state of affairs in Spain influenced by cultural gender constructs, as evidenced in the use of words or satirical images reproduced in the press of the time.³² Furthermore, continuing his efforts to integrate Spain into the global framework, Maximiliano Fuentes Codera analysed the transnational impact of the Great War simultaneously on two countries, Spain and Argentina, which remained neutral throughout the conflict.³³ Both countries showed that the conflict had a global influence and deeply affected local political and cultural processes, even in areas geographically distant from the trenches. Fuentes Codera's study has shown how ideas and actors circulated in two neutral societies on both sides of the Atlantic with profound parallels.

Furthermore, new works have revisited and explored in greater depth certain approaches and questions that deserved additional attention.³⁴ In this regard, the work of some young historians such as Marina Pérez de Arcos and, above all, Zorann Petrovici has highlighted the humanitarian work of Alfonso XIII during the Great War. This work has benefitted from the project to open up and digitise the vast holdings of the *Archivo General de Palacio*.³⁵ In 2025, Alejandro Acosta's book on Spanish volunteers in the First World War shed light on the adoption of these combatants as a symbolic element in Spanish-French relations and revealed the cultural interpretations that shaped the construction of a public memory of this volunteerism, in line with the identity and nationalisation objectives in Spain at the beginning of the 20th century.³⁶

Despite all the advances made in the field of historiography in recent decades, there are still questions that remain to be investigated. In this regard, while aspects such as propaganda, espionage and the connection between Spanish political and social reality and the external context have been extensively studied and are well known, it is necessary to continue moving forward, paying attention to new international historiographical trends and continuing

to delve deeper into debates and actors whose importance must be emphasised. Thus, the permeation that the discourses generated by pro-Allied and pro-German intellectuals and opinion-makers had on Spanish society remains an enigma; that is, it is still difficult to gauge whether Spanish society participated in a cultural mobilisation and became ideologically tense due to the war, or whether it remained largely indifferent to the fate of the conflict, and in either case, for what set of reasons. Similarly, it is worth reflecting on the definitions of the ever-polysemic neutrality, studying the role of women in the pro-Allied mobilisation, and delving deeper into the transnational relations established by Spanish intellectuals with their European colleagues, many of whom they would meet and work with in the years to come in the League of Nations' International Intellectual Cooperation system. Similarly, the phenomenon of armed volunteering should be approached from a transnational perspective, and further study should be given to discussions within political cultures such as the Carlist movement, the role of cinema as a tool for propaganda and awareness-raising in neutral societies such as Spain, the relation among Spain and other neutral countries, solidarity initiatives within civil society, and the consolidation of pacifism as an aspiration of certain sectors of Spanish society.

Conclusion

In general terms, it can be said that in the first quarter of the 21st century, Spanish historiography has completed a very well-defined overview of Spain's relationship with the First World War. Spanish historiography developed with little interest in the period 1914-1918, based on the premise that Spain had been a European exception and had remained on the sidelines of the conflict, like an isolated island. However, the studies published in recent decades have been able, due to their quantity and quality, to compensate for this historiographical delay in a short period of time and connect Spanish historiography with the trends and concerns of the international historiographical scene, in which Spanish historians are called upon to play a key role. Today, no one doubts that neutrality was not a defensive bulwark against the winds of war, but rather, in the famous words of Minister Eduardo Aunós, "the war came home." Despite not participating directly in the armed conflict, Spain was another stage in a global conflict in an interconnected world, in which wars were not only fought on the battlefronts and in the belligerent countries. The challenges facing Spanish historiography in the 21st century are set to encourage new generations of historians to expand their knowledge of neutral Spain through heuristic work in numerous international archives that have yet to be explored and through full and effective integration into a more connected historiographical and academic reality that will require more collective work and active participation in international forums.

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