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## FRANCO'S CHOICE

### THE REEVALUATION OF SPAIN'S NEUTRALITY AND NON-BELLIGERENCE DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

#### Abstract

General Francisco Franco established his dictatorship in Spain in 1939 after winning the Civil War fought against the democratic Republican government. The same year, the Second World War broke out. The *Caudillo* wanted his country to remain neutral, but Spain soon moved forward to the status of non-belligerence: Franco backed Mussolini and Hitler on the level of propaganda, and he also sent voluntary troops to help the Germans, although he also maintained relations with the Allies. Later, the country returned to the status of neutrality. The aim of my article is to highlight the main features of the Spanish attitude and the government's diplomatic maneuvers between the Axis powers and the Allies, paying special attention to Franco's possibilities and doubts.

**Keywords:** Spain, Second World War, Neutrality, Non-Belligerence, Blue Division

In the majority of the academic books and studies written on the history of the Second World War, Spain usually receives little attention, appearing only as a side topic or footnote. This attitude may not be surprising, since in a war primarily the belligerent nations are taken into consideration, and, from this aspect, the Hispanic country did not make a significant contribution. Nevertheless, it is necessary to examine Spain's role and activities in the period of this global armed conflict in order to receive a thorough and comprehensive overview on the international relations of the war.

## The Background: Spain and Francisco Franco's Dictatorship

The Spanish Civil War, fought between 1936 and 1939, is remembered by most historians as a direct prelude to the Second World War. The clash between the left-wing Republican government (where all forces from the centre-left to the radical far-left were represented, together with other political associations and trade unions) and the right-wing forces that responded to the administration's actions with a military coup, was essentially a civil war between various groups of the Spanish nation (in the Spanish historiography it is often called "the fratricidal war"), but it also had multiple international implications. The left-wing government received moderate help from the Soviet Union and volunteers from several countries of the world (the *International Brigades*) came to take a stand against the right-wing rebels in the name of anti-fascism. The foreign background of the other side was much more significant and relevant to our topic: Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy provided support to the Spanish rebels, initially led by several generals, later commanded by General Francisco Franco. Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini hoped that a Spain under right-wing military leadership would later be a useful collaborator during the implementation of their international plans. One of the most spectacular and notorious manifestations of the two countries' assistance occurred on 26 April 1937, when the German Condor Legion and the Italian Legionary Air Force carried out the aerial bombing of the town of Guernica in the Basque Country, killing over a hundred (other estimates put the death toll at nearly 300) residents – later that year, the destruction was commemorated by Pablo Picasso's painting *Guernica*. The Italian and German assistance consisted essentially of sending combat troops, weapons, tanks, aircraft and ammunition, and both countries engaged in a vigorous international propaganda campaign on behalf of the Spanish insurgents.<sup>1</sup> It would seem natural that the two European leaders, but Adolf Hitler in particular, would later expect some kind of compensation from Spain in return for the help they had received in the late 1930s.

After the end of the Civil War, General Franco established an authoritarian regime under the name the "New Spain". The armed forces and the Catholic Church constituted the fundamental pillars of the regime, which considered itself National Catholic, conservative, and anti-communist. The ideology of the regime cannot be defined by the exclusivity of one specific component, but it was close to the ideals of the right-wing regimes of the period. Albeit Franco's Spain cannot be called fascist for the entire period of its existence (1939-1975), it can be classified as a far-right regime on the basis of a number of factors; until the end of the Second World War the *Falange* (full name: Spanish Phalanx of the

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<sup>1</sup> The best synthesis in English on the Spanish Civil War is: P. Preston, *The Spanish Civil War. Reaction, Revolution and Revenge*. New York–London 2007: W.W. Norton & Company.

Councils of the National Syndicalist Offensive<sup>2</sup>), the only authorised party, played a key role in the government, and its members followed the ideals of Benito Mussolini's Italian National Fascist Party.

In the 1940s the regime was ruled by a right-wing dictatorship, the first half of which coincided with the Second World War: the regime removed its opponents from the worlds of politics, culture and education, thousands were executed, nearly 300 000 were forced into emigration, all left-wing organisations and parties were proscribed, nationalities (such as the Catalan, Basque and Gallego) were banned from using their languages and the control over the society was guaranteed by the state-supervised terror and propaganda in all areas of life. As a result of the Civil War, the country was isolated internationally, most democratic powers broke off their ties with Franco's dictatorship, therefore the situation of the impoverished nation worsened. Only a couple of countries maintained their diplomatic relations with Spain, like Portugal, Argentina and the Vatican. However, from the early 1950s, in the context of an escalating Cold War, the West needed the cooperation of the Spanish government that had been firmly anti-communist for decades. Consequently, the Western democracies and Spain commenced the policy of rapprochement, economic and military agreements were reached (especially with the United States) and the regime gradually toned down its former dictatorial attitudes.<sup>3</sup> In order to survive the following decades, the cooperation with the US and Great Britain became fundamental.

## **The Second World War: Doubts and Deliberations in Madrid**

When the war broke out, General Francisco Franco (*el Caudillo*) was clearly supportive to the Axis powers, but it was not clear to what extent and in what way he could express his sympathy. In 1939, Spain was in economic, infrastructural and moral ruins. The government's campaign of revenge against the vanquished groups was intensifying, while the armed forces continued for many years to fight against the left-wing (mainly communist and anarchist) guerrillas who refused to accept their defeat. In this situation, raising the question of entering another war met even greater obstacles than usual. Essentially, Spain could choose between two alternatives: to participate actively in the war on the side of the Axis powers or to remain neutral, as it had done in the First World War. The third option, cooperation with the Allies, was out of the question due to the political-ideological aversion and also because the Spanish government was aware that National Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy could hinder the Iberian country's goals during the war and also in the period that followed. At the same time, it did not want to become an enemy of the Allies,

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<sup>2</sup> The party's original Spanish name was: Falange Española de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista.

<sup>3</sup> See: S.G. Payne, *The Franco Regime 1936-1975*. London 2000: Phoenix Press.

as Franco was not convinced of the war's outcome, he was still uncertain about which countries would have the decisive influence on Europe's future. It was obvious to the Caudillo that the Spanish empire would never regain its former greatness, splendor and influence, but he wanted his country to play a more important role in both Europe and Latin America than he had done before, and he hoped that after the war his plans could be realized if he chose the perfect ally. Since it was geographically and politically impossible to unite Spain and the former Latin American colonies, they tried to accomplish this on an intellectual and cultural level. The aim was to create what Benedict Anderson called an "imagined community", where the participants were not necessarily connected by direct political power, but were tied by a link that emanated from the past and the present.<sup>4</sup> The "imperial will", embodied by Falange, showed that, although the Latin American colonies had already separated from the motherland, reunification in the spiritual realm could happen again. In their opinion, no real estrangement had actually taken place, because the Hispanic race had always been one and united, its peoples could not be torn apart by any earthly power. The common past, language, customs, culture, religion and the Hispanic blood that flows in both Spaniards and Latin Americans would always bind the peoples on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. This conviction, embodied by the notion of *Hispanidad*,<sup>5</sup> was a crucial element when Franco explored the range of his possibilities.

From the early autumn of 1940, the Foreign Ministries of Spain and Germany held discussions about the terms on which the Mediterranean country would enter the war, although both sides were aware that the Spanish nation, devastated by the previous Civil War, was unlikely to have much to contribute to the Axis cause. On 23 October 1940, a meeting took place between Adolf Hitler and Francisco Franco at the railway station in the French town of Hendaye, near the Spanish border. The reunion was attended by the F hrer and his Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, the Caudillo and his Foreign Minister, Ram n Serrano Su er, and two interpreters. Whereas it was clear to Franco that in the current situation his country was not able to become a belligerent state, Hitler made one last attempt to persuade the Spanish leader. The Germans had to evaluate to what extent the Spanish demands as a condition for entering the war would be acceptable to them. Franco proposed a number of requests, including a substantial increase in German military, raw material and food aid to Spain, the return of Gibraltar to Spanish sovereignty in case of an Axis victory,<sup>6</sup> and the annexation of part of France's North African territories

<sup>4</sup> See this theory in: B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London–New York 1989: Verso.

<sup>5</sup> R. de Maeztu, *Defensa de la Hispanidad*. Madrid 1934, [on-line:] [<http://guardiadelahispanidad.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/defensa-de-la-hispanidad.pdf>] – 23 I 2022.

<sup>6</sup> In accordance with the Treaty of Utrecht, which ended the War of the Spanish Succession in 1713, the Kingdom of Spain ceded Gibraltar to Britain. The need for some form of repossession has been raised frequently in some sections of the Spanish society and in some political parties since then; some have hoped

to Spain – the latter, of course, was contrary to the interests of the French Vichy government, which cooperated with the Germans. It is still unclear to researchers and historians what the main reason was for the failure to reach an agreement: whether Hitler (and also Mussolini) found Franco's territorial and other demands excessive, or the Spanish General made almost unrealistic vindications on purpose in order to avoid his country's entry to the world war. Both approaches may be true at the same time. However, most would agree that the Germans could have achieved (or forced) the Spanish participation, either alone or with the help of the Italians, but it did not seem vital to them; on the contrary, Hitler and Mussolini's inner circle pointed out that the entry of a Spain in bad conditions might be more of a burden than a relief, and Franco's demands were clearly disproportionate and unachievable. In any case, the Führer's pre-existing antipathy towards the Caudillo's personality and the "arrogant and conceited Spanish people who live in a dream world" did not diminish; a few days after the reunion, Hitler declared that "I would rather have three or four teeth pulled out than talk to this man again". Franco's excessive claims may also have offended Hitler, because the General seemed not grateful enough for the German help he had received during the Spanish Civil War.<sup>7</sup>

The meeting, which eventually lasted nearly seven hours, did not achieve its goals, mainly because of the participants' divergent interests, but interpretation problems even made the situation more difficult. As a result of the inaccurate translation, it seemed to the Führer that the Spanish leader was giving superficial, meaningless answers to all questions and suggestions. The German interpreter translated the Spanish sentences in a simplified way, so Franco's original intentions were ineffective: with lengthy explanations and complex sentences he wanted to let Hitler know that, although they could not enter the war at that moment, they would try to help their German allies in some way if necessary.<sup>8</sup> The result was a secret clause (which the world only learned of after 1960), stipulating that Spain could enter the world war later at an unspecified date in support of the Germans; in return, the Germans promised to help the Spanish to regain the authority over Gibraltar. Nevertheless, the agreements that actually did prove useful were those that renewed and even broadened the scope of the economic relations between the two countries.<sup>9</sup>

Parallel to the Spanish–German negotiations, the British were preoccupied that Spain, a key country along the route that leads from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean

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that the UK's withdrawal from the European Union might achieve this, but no serious steps have been taken to do so, nor does such an aspiration seem realistic.

<sup>7</sup> P. Preston, *Franco, Caudillo de España*. Barcelona 1998: Mondadori, pp. 481–494; idem, Franco and Hitler. The Myth of Hendaye 1940. *Contemporary European History* 1992, 1 (1), pp. 1–16; D. Wingeate Pike, *Franco and the Axis Stigma*. New York 2008: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 43–49.

<sup>8</sup> A. Lénárt, A spanyol változat. Fordítók és tolmácsok a Franco-diktatúrában. *Aetas* 2020, 35 (2), pp. 26–36.

<sup>9</sup> R. García Pérez, *Franquismo y Tercer Reich. Las relaciones económicas hispano-alemanas durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial*. Madrid 1994: Centro de Estudios Constitucionales, pp. 385–387.

Sea, would enter the war on the side of the Axis powers, but they also hoped that the Iberian country's current condition in terms of economy and infrastructure could not enable its active involvement. However, it was an alarming signal that shortly before the Hendaye meeting Franco dismissed several of his ministers, including his minister of Foreign Affairs who had taken a pro-British stance, and replaced them with clearly pro-German, Falangist politicians. In compensation for maintaining neutrality, Great Britain continued to provide food aid to Spain and bought various raw materials from Franco. In 1942, the British resorted to other methods, with limited success: Spanish generals and other officers were bribed to emphasize the benefits of neutrality for their government and army. Britain and the United States tried to prevent Spain from becoming a belligerent country, mainly through aid and trade relations, but they could not be sure whether Franco would enter the war or not. There was a well-founded concern that Hitler might comply with the Caudillo's demands, therefore Spain would no longer need the Allies to help the country survive, as the Germans would take over their role. This would have irreversibly altered the course of the world war: the Axis powers would have taken control of the Strait of Gibraltar linking the Atlantic region to the Mediterranean (the British probably could not have kept their overseas territory), supplies from Asia and Africa to Britain by sea would have been threatened, and the establishment of German and Italian military bases on Spanish territory would have had drastic consequences for the whole European theatre of operations. This was a constant danger, and the Allies could only hope that Spain's extremely poor economic and infrastructural situation would not change for the better in the following years, and also that it would not risk replacing the current British and American aid with the German one, because the latter seemed uncertain for the time being. The supply of food and raw materials (such as oil) depended to a large extent on the goodwill of the Allies. The Spanish, British, American and also the German governments were aware of this fact, therefore it was likely that the German–Spanish (and also Italian–Spanish) cooperation would not intensify.<sup>10</sup>

Soon afterwards, however, it became more important for the Axis powers that Spain should enter the war. The unfolding events required Hitler to take control over Gibraltar with the purpose of closing the Mediterranean gateway before the Allies. For that reason, the active involvement of the Spanish authorities and troops was inevitable. Negotiations were relaunched, but Franco's government insisted on the demands they had made at the Hendaye meeting and also indicated that, at the moment, their country needed supplies from the British in return for maintaining neutrality. In order to enter the war at a later date, several conditions needed to be fulfilled; in particular, that Germany should take over Britain's role in supplying Spain and the Iberian country should receive the North African

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<sup>10</sup> E. Moradiellos, *Franco frente a Churchill. Espa a y Gran Bret a en la Segunda Guerra Mundial (1939-1945)*. Barcelona 2005: Ediciones Pen nsula.



territories it had requested and subsequently Gibraltar as well. Hitler did not want to meet the Spanish General again in person, instead German politicians and diplomats negotiated with the Caudillo, and on 12 February 1941 Mussolini also tried to convince Franco in Bordighera, Italy. This failed to achieve the desired result, which the Duce handled sympathetically; he considered that “how can we push a country into war which has only one day’s bread in reserve?”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, relations between Italy and Spain extended into many areas during the years of the Second World War, with the possibility that they might soon be officially fighting on the same side.<sup>12</sup> It seemed clear that the only real solution was to comply with Franco’s demands, but Hitler was not willing to obey.

An expert on Spanish–Japanese relations has taken a broader perspective on Franco’s relationship with the actors of the Second World War, focusing on the tripartite division established by the Caudillo. Franco distinguished three wars running in parallel, in each of which his country played a different role. In the Axis powers’ war against the Soviet Union, he clearly expressed his support for the former, in the war with the Allies he tried to maintain his neutrality, while in the region of the Pacific Ocean he deemed it necessary to defeat the Japanese, a nation he considered barbaric and inferior.<sup>13</sup> We will see later how the details of this approach influenced Franco’s actions.

### The Shades of Non-Belligerence

From June 1940 onwards, Spain moderately supported the Axis powers from the status of “non-belligerent” instead of the previous neutrality. The main difference between the two conditions is that a non-belligerent state may be supporting certain belligerents in a war, with the exception of not being directly involved in military operations. At the same time, the neutral country tries to avoid any type of engagement with the conflict.<sup>14</sup>

Spain adopted a consistently elaborated opportunist position, and sought to adapt its attitude to the international situation, the state of the war and its own interests at the same time. The transition from neutrality to non-belligerence enabled Spain to provide some assistance to its ideological allies. At this point, Franco seemed to be convinced that the Axis powers would emerge from the war as victorious states and was not afraid to make concessions to them. From the second half of 1940, German submarines were allowed to lie at anchor and refuel themselves in Spanish ports, which was of great importance to

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<sup>11</sup> P. Preston, *Franco, Caudillo...*, p. 526.

<sup>12</sup> E. Katona, La cuestión de la neutralidad española e Italia (1939-1943). *Acta Hispanica* 2002, 7, pp. 59-75.

<sup>13</sup> F. Rodao García, Franco contra el Imperio japonés. Guerra a los bárbaros de Oriente. *Clío. Revista de historia* 2004, 32, pp. 18-25.

<sup>14</sup> See in detail: L. Ferro, N. Verlinden, Neutrality During Armed Conflicts. A Coherent Approach to Third-state Support for Warring Parties. *Chinese Journal of International Law* 2018, 17 (1), pp. 15-43.

Hitler: their range was greatly increased, and they could even reach as far as Brazil. The Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs often passed on information to the Germans from their ambassadors who worked in other countries, even neutral ones, and also reported to the Third Reich on diplomats accredited to Madrid.<sup>15</sup> Propaganda, on the other hand, became openly “belligerent”, with Spanish newspapers and newsreels broadcast in movie theaters showing support for the Germans and Italians, reporting exclusively on their victories, thus preparing the population for the fact that if Spain eventually entered the war, it would clearly be on the side of the triumphants. In addition to the news, Spanish society was also exposed to propaganda messages during the leisure activities, mainly through cinema,<sup>16</sup> but the country’s position was also evident on the basis of the knowledge it had transmitted through public education.

Spain also took part in wartime espionage activities as an expression of sympathy for Germany. The well-organised German spy network was active in the Axis, Allied and neutral countries, and in the Spanish case it enjoyed the support of the Francoist government and the regime’s authorities. Alongside the spies, Gestapo officers were also present, who not only sought information on the activities of the Allied (mainly British) secret services, but also monitored their own compatriots, uncovering Germans working as double agents in Spain, who were only pretending to support the Nazi cause and against whom they could act on Spanish soil. This meant, primarily, that they were entitled to arrest and repatriate them, but they could also resort to other means if they considered it necessary. It was not clear to the public what mission they were accomplishing, and like other secret services, German agents tried to work in secrecy, even covering up their operations as commercial activities.<sup>17</sup> Obviously, the enemy was also aware that the Spanish were allowing German espionage on their territory, and they took advantage of this knowledge. The Allies wanted Spain to play a key role in the so-called *Operation Mincemeat*. The aim was to make the Germans believe that their plan was to invade Greece, so that they would concentrate their forces there instead of Sicily, Italy. One of the main set-ups for this spy movie-style operation was the sudden appearance of a dead body with forged documents in Huelva, Spain. The Spanish authorities shared the documentation he was carrying with the German consul, successfully deceiving Hitler too, who redeployed part of his troops from the Italian region to Greek waters. This operation on Spanish territory facilitated the invasion of Sicily.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> J. Tusell, *Historia de Espa a en el siglo XX*, vol. 3. Madrid 2007: Taurus, pp. 121-125, 152-153.

<sup>16</sup> A. L nart, Ideology and Film in the Spain of General Francisco Franco. * t kontinens* 2015, 2, pp. 323-336.

<sup>17</sup> C. Collado Seidel, Espa a y los agentes alemanes 1944-1947. Intransigencia y pragmatismo pol tico. *Espacio, tiempo y forma. Serie V. Historia Contempor nea* 1992, 5, pp. 431-482; F.J. Ju rez Camacho, El espionaje Alem n en Espa a a trav s del consorcio empresarial SOFINDUS. *Diacronie. Studi di Storia Contemporanea* 2016, 28.

<sup>18</sup> E. Moradiellos, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-127.



The status of non-belligerence also allowed Franco to support Hitler with military force, although Spain was not actively involved in the Second World War. He could not have done so with a regular army, but there was no obstacle to set up a unit of volunteers, this way he didn't have to declare war on the Soviet Union. For the Spanish society the explanation was the following: the volunteers, just like in the previous civil war, were fighting against communism, because the war against "bolshevik atheism" had to be waged in the name of Christianity. The criterion of volunteerism was not, of course, fully met, but officially all soldiers volunteered to take part in the *Blue Division* (officially known as the Spanish Volunteer Division) which was sent to the Eastern Front to help the Germans. Mainly veteran soldiers and civilians sympathetic to fascism applied for the mission in exchange for material and other benefits, like food or ration cards. However, there were also some who, in compensation for their services, were granted a reduction or the abolition of the prison sentence imposed on them or on a member of their family by the authorities.<sup>19</sup> Between 1941 and 1943, approximately 50 000 Spanish soldiers fought in this infantry division led by General Agustín Muñoz Grandes, and took part in numerous battles, the most significant was the siege of Leningrad. Almost 150 Spanish women also accompanied them, assisting as nurses in the field hospitals. In the autumn of 1943, Franco came under increasing pressure from the Allies to recall the division or Spain would be declared a belligerent country. The Caudillo complied with this request, not only owing to the threat, but also because his volunteers had suffered a series of casualties, with nearly 5 000 killed and many taken prisoner by the Soviets and sent to labour camps. Franco believed that if his country would not enter the war later, the deployment of the Blue Division would essentially repay the debt he owed for the German assistance during the Spanish Civil War.<sup>20</sup> Not all Spaniards returned home when the troops were called back, many of them – being staunch anti-communists – joined the German army instead.<sup>21</sup>

As mentioned above, Spain was also in contact with the Allies, but this did not exclude close (and increasingly closer) economic cooperation with the Axis powers. Both his neutral and non-belligerent status allowed General Franco to maintain agreements that were to his advantage in both directions. Commercial treaties had already been concluded with

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<sup>19</sup> For example, one of the most important Spanish film directors, Luis García Berlanga joined the Blue Division in exchange for his father's death sentence being commuted. Berlanga had no sympathy for the political right, and in his film satires he constantly criticised what he saw as a hypocritical Christian conservative society; he joined the division for the family reasons mentioned above. F. Perales, *Luis García Berlanga*. Madrid 1997: Ediciones Cátedra, pp. 20-22.

<sup>20</sup> More than a decade later, the idea of setting up a volunteer detachment to fight communism was raised again, also under the command of General Agustín Muñoz Grandes: during the Hungarian revolution of 1956 a Spanish division was to be sent to Budapest to help the Hungarian people fight against the Soviets, but this plan ultimately failed.

<sup>21</sup> See: C. Caballero Jurado, *La División Azul. Historia completa de los voluntarios españoles de Hitler. De 1941 a la actualidad*. Madrid 2019: La Esfera de los Libros.

Germany during the Spanish Civil War to complement the military aid provided to the rebels. These were renewed in 1939 and new ones were also signed. Not only did the Spanish need the income that arrived from their partner, but it was also vital for the Germans to have access to the raw materials provided by Spain. The most important of these materials was tungsten, which was already being produced by German companies in Spanish territories under 10-year concession contracts, as it was fundamental for the uninterrupted operation of the German armories. Even if Spain did not enter the war, its help was essential for the Germans to fight their battles. The Allies interpreted this as if Spain were selling ready-made weapons to the Nazis, and again threatened to treat them as a belligerent country. Franco could not desist from the agreement with Germans, because Hitler still claimed that the Spanish government owed him for the support granted during the civil war. The situation changed in August 1944, when the Allies were making progress in France, disrupting the continental link between Spain and Germany.<sup>22</sup>

### The Consequences of the New Neutrality

From the beginning of 1943, General Franco judged that the events of the war had taken an unfavourable turn for him, and he tried to avoid being removed after the imminent fall of Hitler and Mussolini. His country once again declared itself neutral, which was significant only on the official, theoretical level, because in practice little had changed. At the same time, Franco tried to loosen relations with the Axis powers.

There was mutual sympathy and cooperation between Spain and Germany in most areas, but on some issues there was a lack of harmony. One of the most important of these conflicting topics was the attitude towards the Jews. In contrast to the anti-Semitism of the German National Socialists, in the Spanish National Catholicism's ideology the occasional use of the prefix "Judeo" was essentially a religious and not a racially motivated insult, and drastic action against the Jews was not seriously considered. Once the Spanish government became aware of the existence of the Nazi concentration camps, it made it possible for Spanish diplomats serving in various European countries to issue visas to applicants of Jewish descent who could prove their Spanish origin.<sup>23</sup> Some of these diplomats, however, helped not only the Jews whose origins could be traced to the Iberian Peninsula, but all Jews they could find. One of the most famous cases is the mission of the Spanish diplomat Ángel Sanz Briz, who saved more than 5 000 Jews from Budapest at the end of 1944, providing them protection and shelter in the Spanish embassy of the Hungarian capital. His

<sup>22</sup> Ch. Leitz, *Economic Relations between Nazi Germany and Franco's Spain 1936-1945*. Oxford 1996: Clarendon Press, pp. 170-196.

<sup>23</sup> M. Alpert, Spain and the Jews in the Second World War. *Jewish Historical Studies* 2009, 42, pp. 201-210.

mission was not supported by Franco and his government, but research documents suggest that he knew about it and for a long time did nothing to stop his diplomat. Nevertheless, he reassigned Sanz Briz to Switzerland when his activities became excessively noticeable for the Hungarian authorities and the Germans, and in Hitler's eyes they were considered an explicit provocation. The Spanish General could also be forgiving of his diplomat's actions because by this time he thought that the Allied victory was more likely, so he could also prove that he would have dared to confront the Germans in certain issues.<sup>24</sup>

Although the central topic of this article is the European theatre of operations, it is necessary to dedicate a paragraph to the Pacific region in order to clarify what has already been mentioned briefly about the last phase of the world war: Franco's attitude to the various participants of the war was different. There were a large number of Spaniards in the Pacific region; in the past decades mainly merchants and missionaries had arrived there, and after the Spanish Civil War, Republican refugees settled down there. They lived partly in the former Spanish colony of the Philippines and partly in other countries, most of them helped the local people in their struggle against the conquering Japanese. The Francoist propaganda, in line with Spanish interests in Europe, initially tried to win them over to support the Japanese, but this resulted in failure. During the US–Japanese confrontations, the Spaniards of the region supported the Americans mainly with arms or through espionage, therefore they suffered persecution from Japanese troops, which often led to massacres. Franco could no longer approve the Japanese aggression towards the Spanish groups, and ideological sympathy was overridden by patriotism: he could not tolerate the massacre of Catholic Spaniards by people of a different culture, even if they had been potential allies in the world war. Spanish rhetoric about the Japanese changed, from 1944 onwards they were portrayed in the press and propaganda as barbaric people that must be defeated, in the last months of the war even the possibility of Spain declaring war on Japan arose. Even though the latter did not happen, but relations between the two countries became extremely hostile. Franco did not take many risks, because the victory of the Axis powers in Europe had become quite improbable, and his conflict with a distant country on another continent was a burden he could easily bear.<sup>25</sup>

It is a well-known fact that in the last weeks of the Second World War and the period afterwards, Nazis and their allies fleeing prosecution tried to leave Germany, Austria, Poland and Hungary with Latin America being the primary destination. Many of them were helped by Spain as a transit country, Spanish ports were used as a departure point for those who could arrive there. At the same time, the Spanish government gave shelter

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<sup>24</sup> A. Espada, *En nombre de Franco. Los héroes de la embajada de España en el Budapest nazi*. Barcelona 2013: Espasa Libros; I. Harsányi, Meggyőződés vagy kötelességteljesítés. Ángel Sanz Briz szerepe az üldözött magyar zsidók életében (1944). In: A. Anderle (ed.), *Zsidóság a hispán világban*, Szeged 2004: University of Szeged, Department of Hispanic Studies, pp. 95–108.

<sup>25</sup> F. Rodao García, *op. cit.*, pp. 18–25.

to thousands of Nazi and Nazi sympathiser war criminals who were allowed to stay in the country temporarily or for longer periods, although later, by virtue of the international pressure, some of them were handed over to tribunals. The German colony in Spain, which was the second most populous foreign group after the Portuguese at the time, tried to assist those compatriots who were admitted to the country. Most of the nearly 20 000 German emigrants living there had spied for the Nazis during the world war, and after the conflict was over they tried to help their fellow-countrymen escape the continent or live safely in the Spanish right-wing dictatorship.<sup>26</sup> The most famous Nazi refugee in Spain was Otto Skorzeny, former SS lieutenant colonel and confidant of Adolf Hitler, who settled down in Spain and became a successful businessman, frequent guest of the Spanish social events, and influential adviser of both Francisco Franco and Juan Domingo Per n, president of Argentina, and he also took part in several international conspirations and secret missions until his death. He is often called “the most dangerous man in Europe”.<sup>27</sup> However, Franco’s government could not openly oppose the triumphant powers, so it had to be careful how it handled the issues that arose. The aim of the Spanish dictatorship was survival.

## The Future

The European far right was defeated in the Second World War, which led to the fall of Hitler and Mussolini. Franco tried to avoid the same fate. The Allied countries, especially Great Britain and the United States, were aware that the Spanish regime was also sympathetic to fascism, and its adherence to the neutral and non-belligerent status was mainly due to the country’s limited resources, not out of conviction. The majority of the democratic powers withdrew their ambassadors from Spain, seeking to isolate the dictatorship completely, expecting that the country, already in a poor financial and infrastructural situation, would collapse soon. Only a few foreign collaborators remained (such as Antonio Salazar’s Portugal, Juan Domingo Per n’s Argentina or the Vatican), but they were unable to ease the problems in any significant way. For many countries in Europe, the *Marshall Plan* (European Recovery Program) offered some hope, but the Spanish could not benefit from this aid: although the country was in ruins, it was not because of its involvement in the Second World War, but as a consequence of the preceding civil war. The Spanish

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<sup>26</sup> U. Go ni, *The Real Odessa. How Per n Brought the Nazi War Criminals to Argentina*. London–New York 2002: Granta Books; C. Collado Seidel, *op. cit.*, pp. 431–482.

<sup>27</sup> See: Ch. Whiting, *Skorzeny. The Most Dangerous Man in Europe*. Boston 1998: DaCapo Press. In 2021 Netflix released the Spanish streaming television series *Jaguar*, which tells the story of a group of Nazi hunters who are looking for German war criminals in Madrid in the 1960s. One of the central antagonist characters, Otto Bachmann, living under the protection of the Francoist authorities, is clearly based on Otto Skorzeny.

Republican groups, formerly defeated by Franco and now operating in exile, opened negotiations with the Western democracies to support their return to Spain, because they thought that they were the only real democratic alternative to the regime they called fascist. At the same time, confident in the weakness of the Spanish government and in its ideological-political “loneliness” and isolation following the defeat of the Axis powers, the Spanish communist guerrillas in the south of France became active and began missions of sabotage in Northern Spain with a detachment of 9 000 men.<sup>28</sup> Franco had to face serious domestic problems, aggravated by the unfavourable outcomes of the Second World War.

Nevertheless, the international environment changed as the Cold War shifted the balance of power and priorities. For the Western powers, especially the United States and Great Britain, the fight against communism became the primary objective and the Soviet Union the main adversary. In this new situation, the role and relevance of General Francisco Franco, an uncompromising anti-communist since the 1930s, was enhanced, and an anti-Soviet ally on the Iberian Peninsula proved to be useful under these new circumstances. From the early 1950s, Spain and the USA signed a series of economic and military cooperation agreements, and in 1955 the Iberian country was admitted to the United Nations. In order to make his country appear more acceptable and to be seen as a real partner by the outside world, Franco pursued a policy of gradual opening from the end of the 1950s onwards, and the dictatorship began to “soften” its rigor. However, far from being a democracy, the country continued to endure under the one-party system and a military dictatorship, but the new measures ensured that the regime could survive until the General's death in 1975. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to claim that Franco's dictatorship was almost wiped out by the Second World War, but it was ultimately saved by the Cold War.

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<sup>28</sup> J.L. Orella Martínez, El nuevo estado español, después de la guerra (1939-1945). In: J. Paredes (ed.), *Historia de España contemporánea*. Barcelona 2009: Sello Editorial, pp. 771-791.

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