

INTERESTS ETERNAL AND PERPETUAL:
BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY AND
THE ROYAL NAVY IN THE
SPANISH CIVIL WAR,

1936 - 1937

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This thesis will demonstrate that the British leaders saw the policy of non-intervention during the Spanish Civil War as the best option available under the circumstances, and will also focus on the role of the Royal Navy in carrying out that policy. Unpublished sources include Cabinet and Admiralty papers. Printed sources include the *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, newspaper and periodical articles, and memoirs. This thesis, covering the years 1936-37, is broken down into six chapters, each covering a time frame that reflected a change of policy or naval mission. The non-intervention policy was seen as the best available at the time, but it was shortsighted and ignored potentially serious long-term consequences.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When the Spanish Civil War broke out on July 19, 1936, the makers of British foreign policy were caught looking in the wrong direction. Preoccupied with other crises around the world such as Italian aggression in Abyssinia, German rearmament and reoccupation of the Rhineland, Japanese belligerence in China, Arab revolts in Palestine, and the generally dismal economic situation virtually everywhere, it was perhaps understandable that a situation on England's own doorstep should have been overlooked. The rest of the world was taken by surprise as well, including most Spaniards. As the latest in a long line of events that eventually led to the eruption of worldwide hostilities, the war in Spain was the most confusing and potentially the most catastrophic.

This thesis will demonstrate that the Non-Intervention policy pursued by the British seemed to be the best course available at the time, and will also focus on the role of the Royal Navy in carrying out that policy from July, 1936 to September, 1937. The policy of Non-Intervention adopted by Britain, as pointless as it seemed to be, was really the only practical policy available that could fulfill British goals. On one level it was largely an example of confusion and expediency, with politicians working at cross-purposes and diplomats negotiating endlessly, and generally fruitlessly, to stabilize a threatening situation. On another level it was an object lesson in the hazards of conducting open diplomacy with opponents that had no scruples about operating covertly

to further their own advantage. The Spanish Civil War also began the process of convincing the leaders of the European democracies that Hitler and Mussolini could not be trusted to keep their word. For all the negative aspects of Non-Intervention, and they were many, it appeared to be the best compromise likely to further the aims of British policy.

Viscount Palmerston once said “We have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and these interests it is our duty to follow.” In serving the perceived imperial interests, the British had two simple objectives in Spain: prevent the war from spreading to all of Europe, and maintain Spanish territorial integrity safe from encroachment by outsiders, especially Italy. By adopting such specific short term goals the British improved their chances for success, but at the cost of ignoring the serious long-term damage caused by a policy based on weakness. Limited by public opinion, budgetary constraints, a tiny army, an obsolescent air force, and a foreign policy dominated by wishful thinking, British diplomats focused on the Spanish Civil War as an isolated event, and employed their two remaining strengths: the ability to talk a problem to death, and naval power. By keeping a strong naval presence off the coast of Spain, the British government indicated, if not a desire, then a willingness to back up its words with actions. In using the naval forces to support its policy, Britain also took advantage of its best military asset, because, despite the navy’s shortcomings, the only real physical strength available to the British policy makers were the men and ships of the Royal Navy.

The government of prime minister Stanley Baldwin was in a difficult position. While he had proven his ability to reconcile his countrymen's opposing views, the same could not be said for relations with the leaders of neighboring nations.¹ Furthermore, Baldwin's delicate health precluded active personal involvement, so he left foreign policy up to the Foreign Office, which was under the leadership of Anthony Eden.² While Eden was a man of considerable ability, Baldwin placed him in the unenviable position of having to both formulate and implement policy with minimal input from his superior. In the face of a situation that the Foreign Office would really rather have been able to ignore, Eden was forced by circumstances to give Spain his full attention.

The British Government was no stranger to involvement in Spanish affairs, an involvement dating back to Elizabeth I and even earlier. After the Napoleonic wars, however, the Duke of Wellington commented that "There is no country in Europe in the affairs of which foreigners can interfere with so little advantage as Spain," and England maintained a "hands-off" policy with regard to Spain except where trade was concerned.³ It was an eminently practical policy that allowed England to largely ignore Spain politically during a time of general unrest, and worked quite well as long as there was no threat to Britain's national security. The Spanish uprising certainly affected the substantial British investments in Spain, primarily in mining interests, but what was of

¹ Anthony Eden, *The Eden Memoirs: Facing the Dictators*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962): 5.

² *Ibid.*, 403.

³ *Ibid.*, 533.

paramount importance was the fact that Britain suddenly faced a potentially very serious threat to its security and economic well-being because of Spain's strategic location.

The Iberian Peninsula, enjoying as it does command of the western Mediterranean and the southern approaches to the English Channel, was of immense interest to the British government. On the other hand, divisiveness in the political arena and marginal industrial and economic performance made Spain itself a minor concern to British policy makers, provided Britain's international position was not threatened. The Nationalist revolt also had the potential to endanger British security, not because of any particular Spanish strength, but because the ideological polarity within the struggle reflected a microcosm of what the European political landscape was fast becoming. The conflict was attracting support for both sides from outside sources which showed a strong possibility of widening the conflict into a general European war, absolutely the last thing that the members of His Majesty's Government wanted to see.

In general terms, the Spanish Civil War pitted political extremes against one another. On the left were the Republicans, the legitimately constituted government of Spain, a collection of Socialists, Communists, Anarchists, and Anarcho-Syndicalists. On the right were the Nationalist rebels, comprising many senior military officers, various fascist organizations, large landowners, and the senior Catholic Church hierarchy. As a practical matter, the conflict came down to one of fascists against socialists, which in turn attracted support from four of the five major powers in Europe, the Nationalists being favored by Germany and Italy, and the Republicans by the Soviet Union and (initially) France.

Because of the ideological component of the conflict, it is not surprising that each side took to eliminating the opposition forcefully through imprisonment, exile, or execution, which led in turn to concern for the welfare of foreign nationals. His Majesty's Government initially responded to this concern in the time-honored method of crisis management of British governments since before Nelson: it sent in the Navy.

For generations the long arm of the Royal Navy was the first to reach into crises along foreign shores where British interests might be threatened, establishing an initial presence which might then enable the diplomats to negotiate from a position of strength or, in more extreme cases, act the part of diplomat or enforcer itself to stabilize or resolve a situation. As tools of policy, units of the Royal Navy could serve as a reminder that British interests in the area needed looking after, or as a bludgeon to defend or expand those interests, or it could embody any combination of levels of force along the spectrum between these two extremes. The only naval requirement was that there be enough water to float a ship close enough to shore to make the vessel's presence known and felt. But in 1936 the Royal Navy faced its own set of problems that had been accumulating for some time, most of which were grounded in overcommitment or underfunding.

Great Britain relied on trade for its lifeblood, and historically had likewise relied on a powerful navy to keep its sea lines of communications open. The great extent of the British empire meant that the navy's job was extremely difficult. Not only was control of the seas a priority to maintain the flow of goods, but colonies made the defense of far-flung lands, which were the sources of and markets for a proportion of those goods,

imperative from a political, economic, and moral standpoint. The need for a navy substantial enough to fulfill the obligations of empire ran afoul of the times, however. The politics of wishful thinking prevalent in the wake of World War I and the formation of the League of Nations, coupled with the economic disaster that was the 1930s, led to deep cuts in military spending. Cuts in force levels left the remaining vessels unable to fulfill commitments adequately.

When called in to evacuate British citizens from Spain, the Royal Navy was being pulled in several directions at once, but nonetheless managed to make a substantial shift of assets on short notice to accomplish the mission. Once on site, however, the mission expanded, entailing an extended presence off the Spanish coast. The policy of Non-Intervention pursued by Eden required that large portions of the Spanish coast be kept under constant surveillance to prevent the ingress of arms to either side in the conflict. Conditions were confusing and sometimes hazardous, with British vessels poised between two warring parties. Volatile diplomatic relationships meant that rules of engagement often changed; what constituted a threat was often unclear.

Primary sources for this paper include unpublished Cabinet minutes and Admiralty papers containing a general narrative and operational reports. Printed sources include *the Documents on British Foreign Policy*, *Parliamentary Debates*, newspaper and periodical articles, and the memoirs of some people involved. Considerable reliance has also been placed on the work of Stephen Roskill for information on the Royal Navy during the interwar years, and on the definitive work of Hugh Thomas for information on the civil war itself.

This thesis is broken down into the time frames that reflected a change in policy or naval mission. The initial mission of the navy, removal of British citizens and other foreign nationals from danger, lasted only about six weeks, from July 20th to September 7th, 1936. The subsequent period of indecision leading up to the Non-Intervention patrol lasted about eight months, from September, 1936, to April, 1937. The patrol itself endured for only about one month, and the subsequent “piracy” crisis a further three months. Britain maintained a constant naval presence off the coast of Spain until the end of the civil war, which is another way of saying that the Royal Navy had ships and men sailing in harm’s way in the middle of an extremely violent civil conflict, while political leaders found themselves very occupied elsewhere trying to keep the peace in Europe. The first thing to do, however, is to establish the backdrop against which these events took place.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND

When World War One ended, the Royal Navy was beyond question the most powerful naval force in the world. By the time of the outbreak of hostilities in Spain, it had been eclipsed by the United States Navy in absolute terms, and the Imperial Japanese Navy in local terms. With commitments spanning the entire globe, from the Americas to the Middle East to Africa to India and the Pacific Ocean, Great Britain found itself hard pressed to deliver on promises to defend its empire from the myriad threats facing it. Caught on the shoals of political expediency, social attitudes, and economic crises, naval expenditures declined from an immediate postwar high of £154,084,000 in 1919-20 to a nadir of £50,164,000 in 1932-33.¹ Manpower went from 176,087 to 89,667 during the same period.² By 1936, when the threats posed by Japan and Italy had manifested themselves clearly through the aggressive actions of those nations, naval expenditures rose substantially, to £64,888,000 and 94,259 men in 1935-36 and steadily upward annually until World War Two. Naval forces, however, simply cannot be built up from scratch in a short period of time regardless of how much money is thrown at the problem. In any case, the roots of the problems facing the Royal Navy ran deeper than money, and were only beginning to be overcome by the middle of 1936.

¹ Stephen Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars* 2 vols. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 2: 489.

² *Ibid.*, 490.

The Royal Navy's performance during the late conflict had, in the public's perception, been less than stellar. The much-vaunted battleships and battlecruisers of the Grand Fleet were kept either in their ports at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys, Cromarty on Moray Firth, and Rosyth on the Firth of Forth, the last two in Scotland, or on occasional "sweeps" of the North Sea. The one major fleet engagement of the entire war, the Battle of Jutland in May of 1916, ended with the Germans able to claim a tactical victory even though the overall strength of the Grand Fleet was hardly diminished.³

More important were the advent of submarines and mines as threats to capital ships. The sinking of three armored cruisers in quick succession by a single U-boat in September of 1914 drove home the effectiveness of a weapon that had, before the war, been described by a British admiral as "unfair, underhanded, and damned un-English!"⁴ Extensive minefields laid by both sides effectively choked movements by the battle fleets. The real war at sea was fought by smaller vessels – cruisers, destroyers, and submarines – and the German U-boat campaigns of 1915 and 1917-1918 came uncomfortably close to starving the United Kingdom into submission before the advent of the convoy system in 1917. In short, the public, correctly or incorrectly, tended to see the money and effort expended to build, man, and train the best navy in the world as largely wasted.

³ Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1976), 246. Even after losing six major vessels to the Germans, the Grand Fleet was able to muster twenty-six battleships and six battlecruisers available for action within twelve hours of returning to port.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 245. The armored cruisers *Aboukir*, *Cressy*, and *Hogue* were sunk within the space of an hour by the same U-boat while on anti-submarine patrol.

Another technical advance that threatened the Royal Navy was the maturation of airpower as an effective weapon. Where the navy had been the bulwark behind which the United Kingdom would ultimately defend itself from invasion through control of the seas around the British Isles, aircraft now posed a very real threat, a foretaste of which was felt through sporadic German bombing raids by dirigibles and airplanes throughout the Great War.

The British answer to the air power problem was to unify all air services under one command with the formation of the Royal Air Force in 1918. The effect of this policy on the Royal Navy was twofold: it added another competitor to the budgetary equation and stunted the development of seaborne airpower. While aircraft carriers were a British innovation at war's end, by the mid- 1930s the Royal Navy had been surpassed by both the United States Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy in carrier tactics and carrier-borne aircraft development. The Royal Navy regained control of the Fleet Air Arm by 1937, only barely in time to field a useful force for the next war, and at that a force grossly inferior to those of the competition.⁵ Furthermore, the relative effectiveness of aircraft against battleships was an open question that was only fully answered in the next war, so ongoing disputes between the advocates of the big-gun ship and those of airpower were a feature endemic to the three major navies (U.S., U.K., and Japan) during the interwar years.⁶ The fact that the Royal Navy did not have ultimate control over its

⁵ Norman Polmar, et al., *Aircraft Carriers: A Graphic History of Carrier Aviation and Its Influence on World Events* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), 74.

⁶ Alfred F. Hurley, *Billy Mitchell: Crusader for Airpower* (New York: F. Watts, 1964), 72. Also, Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 288.

pilots or its aircraft design and procurement for nearly two decades ensured that whatever lead the British had at the end of World War I had been squandered by 1936.⁷

Submarines were a slightly different matter. This “damned un-English” threat to Britain’s survival during World War I had been largely negated by the advent of the convoy system and, near war’s end, by promising developments in anti-submarine weapons and tactics. Specifically, the combination of depth charges and ASDIC (sonar) gave vessels an effective weapon to use against subsurface enemies, and a location device with which to pinpoint where the weapon could be used. Both devices were major breakthroughs in anti-submarine warfare, but where the disarray of the naval air arm tended to minimize confidence in the use of a new technology, the Royal Navy placed excessive trust in its new anti-submarine equipment. By the mid-1930s, the Royal Navy was confident in its ability to defeat the submarine threat, a confidence that was called into question early in the next war, and which the British leaders should have questioned during the Spanish Civil War, as will be seen.⁸

The economic factors affecting the Royal Navy are clear enough. Immediately after the Great War was over, Britain carried out demobilization of the navy in a most inept fashion. First Lord of the Admiralty Sir Eric Geddes, delegated to implement the reductions, swung what became known as “Geddes’ axe” indiscriminately to shrink the navy’s manpower from some 450,000 at war’s end to 176,087 for 1919 - 1920. That

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ B.B. Schofield, *British Sea Power: Naval Policy in the Twentieth Century* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1967), 160.

manpower needed to be reduced was beyond question, but more discretion, or even simple humanity, might have been exercised to minimize negative effects on overall morale:

[I]t has to be said that there was a good deal of uncertainty and discouragement among the officers . . . many officers had become redundant and were in the process of falling under “Geddes’ axe”. One third of the captains were removed from the active list at a blow, with many commanders, lieutenant-commanders, lieutenants, and sub-lieutenants [T]his drastic pruning showed a great lack of foresight and understanding on the part of those responsible, particularly in the case of the young officers The “Geddes axe” was one of the great injustices, and incidentally the worst advertisement, the Royal Navy ever suffered.⁹

The financial crisis beginning in 1929-1930 sparked further pruning of the budget. Building programs were reduced from a level that was already barely adequate, and 1931 saw even further cuts.¹⁰ To comply with the reduced budget, the Admiralty decided to institute reductions in pay instead of implementing further cuts in manpower. These pay cuts were implemented in such a ham-fisted manner that they provoked a mutiny at the Home Fleet base at Invergordon in September of 1931. The pay reductions were announced to the fleet on September 14th, a day before the battleships and cruisers at Invergordon were due to sail for exercises. On the morning of the 15th the crews of the battleships *Nelson*, *Rodney*, and *Valiant*, battlecruiser *Hood*, cruisers *York* and *Norfolk*,

⁹Andrew Browne Cunningham, 1st Viscount of Hyndehope, *A Sailor’s Odyssey* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), 112.

¹⁰Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 268. See also, Roskill, *Naval Policy*, 2: 89.

and the minelayer *Adventure* refused to obey orders to put to sea. There was no real violence, simply a fairly sedate work stoppage, and it did not last more than one or two days in any case.¹¹ It was mutiny nonetheless, and as in all such instances it reduced confidence all around - the officers in the men and vice-versa, the public in the navy, and, by extension, in the government.¹² The mutiny also came at a very bad time politically, with Hitler on the rise in Germany, with Mussolini looking towards enhancing Italy's standing and, maybe worst of all, with Japanese belligerence in Manchuria. The mutiny was not kept secret, which would have been impossible anyway, and was hardly the type of incident to engender respect in the eyes of potential foes.¹³ Britain maintained a tiny standing army, and the Royal Air Force in the early 1930s was composed mainly of obsolescent machines, so the empire could ill afford any further reduction of efficiency in the only instrument of power projection it had available.

Underlying virtually every problem the Royal Navy faced were the deep wounds left by the First World War. Not only was every community affected by the losses of the Great War, but the terrible carnage of the Western Front left the two main democratic powers of Europe, France and the United Kingdom, with a lack of appetite for warfare in any form.¹⁴ In 1936 many Members of Parliament were themselves veterans of the war, and practically all of the rest had lost sons, brothers, or relatives in combat.

As stated by A. J. P. Taylor, “[T]he glory and romance had gone out of war – a profound change in men’s outlook. Previously war and civilization had not been

¹¹ Roskill, *Naval Policy*, 2: 104.

¹² Cunningham, *A Sailor’s Odyssey*, 150-151.

¹³ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 283.

regarded as incompatible. On the contrary, success in war was seen as evidence of superior civilization.”¹⁵ The abattoir of the Western Front changed that attitude. After 1918 war was viewed as an unmitigated evil to be avoided at all costs, and that feeling was coupled with a need to economize to offset the enormous cost of the war and, later, the ravages of the Great Depression. As a result, Britain found itself changing its basic doctrine by which its foreign and military affairs were conducted.

Historically, England used what B. H. Liddell-Hart later termed the “indirect approach” to warfare, that is, attacking a superior enemy on the periphery, where he was least likely to muster local superiority.¹⁶ Indeed, an ongoing debate between the proponents of a “maritime” strategy versus a “continental” strategy had been a feature in British military circles for many years.¹⁷ Briefly, a “continental” strategy involves using large armies in direct conflict with those of the enemy. A “maritime” strategy is the very embodiment of the indirect approach – interdicting trade on the high seas and using the mobility of the navy to make isolated amphibious raids on the edges of enemy territory, thereby stretching the opponents’ resources, and ultimately weakening the enemy to such an extent that the army could then move in for the kill, or the nation could force a negotiated settlement. Classic examples of the latter approach would be Elizabeth I’s strategy against Phillip II of Spain, and George III’s strategy against Napoleon I. In the first case, Britain used small flotillas or individual ships under the command of energetic

¹⁴ Harold Macmillan, *Winds of Change 1914 - 1939* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 528.

¹⁵ A.J.P. Taylor, *From Sarajevo to Potsdam* (London: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1966), 39.

¹⁶ B. H. Liddell-Hart, *Strategy: Second Revised Edition* (New York: Meridian, 1991), 5.

¹⁷ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 104.

leaders to harass Spain's overseas empire, threatening the flow of wealth from the New World. England followed a conceptually similar strategy against Napoleon I, tailored for a situation in which Britain's relative strength was much greater. The large British fleet maintained a close blockade of virtually all of Europe's coast, and after 1808 a relatively small army under Wellington kept bleeding French forces in Spain. Integral to a successful maritime strategy was the periodic availability of allies of convenience on the continent, supported morally and logistically by England, to keep opposing ground forces busy. The British penchant for being the balance of power in Europe, an ongoing effort to prevent any one country from attaining a preponderant strength on the continent, meant that at various times through history they were in alliance with, or in opposition to, Denmark, France, Holland, Prussia, Russia, Spain, and Sweden.

The United Kingdom used its main strength, that of its navy, while playing one country off against another to maintain a balance of power in Europe. The key ingredient to this policy, besides naval strength, was the retention of a measure of independence in the conduct of foreign and military affairs: England would do what was necessary to see that its own interests were looked after.¹⁸

By guaranteeing Belgian neutrality prior to World War I, England committed itself to a continental strategy that cost over 750,000 British lives in the Great War and left the nation deeply scarred. Whether such a strategy was necessary and correct is not the issue here. Britain's effort was a key factor in the defeat of the Central Powers, and its willingness to move substantial forces into northern France and Belgium in a timely

manner was critical in blunting the initial German assault. What is important is to note the effects that the bloodletting had on postwar British foreign and military policy. These effects could essentially be summed up in two words: collective security.

The notion of collective security hinged on the belief that, after the horror of the late conflict, all countries were sick of war and would do what was needed to avoid its recurrence. If all nations promised to come to the aid of the victim of some aggressive attack by a neighbor, then that neighbor would be deterred from making such an attack. Symbolized by the League of Nations and a succession of treaties such as the Washington Naval Treaty, the Locarno Pact, the Kellogg-Briand Pact, the two London Naval Agreements, and an ongoing but unsuccessful effort at international disarmament, collective security was certainly a fine ideal by which to be guided and a worthy goal to work toward. Collective security can work under the right conditions, but not when those countries attempting it remain mired in fantasy. In reality, the League of Nations was little more than a forum for discussion, substantially hobbled by the absence of the United States from its membership and devoid of military teeth with which to deter aggression. The various treaties were dependent on the good will of their signatories to be effective.

The British government in the 1920s and 1930s, faced with a mood of pacifism in the general population and a dire need to pinch pennies, allowed itself to believe in the good

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 55, 167.

will of the signatories and, once the good intentions expressed were accepted as fact, allowed wishful thinking to dominate the formulation of policy.¹⁹

From a diplomatic standpoint, the two most significant treaties presented between the wars were the Locarno Pact of 1925 and the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928. They typified the then current hope that the Great War would be the last war, even though early warning signs to the contrary were already beginning to appear.

The Locarno Pact, named for the Swiss town in which it was negotiated, guaranteed the maintenance of the boundaries of France, Germany, and Belgium as laid down in the Treaty of Versailles. It committed the participants to “settle by peaceful means . . . questions of every kind which may arise between them and which it may not be possible to settle by the normal methods of diplomacy,” and specified the Council of the League of Nations as the forum in which such questions were to be settled.²⁰ It was also intended to reinforce articles 42 and 43 of the Versailles Treaty which stipulated a demilitarized zone from the Franco-Belgian-German border to a line fifty kilometers east of the Rhine river.²¹ Germany, France, Belgium, Great Britain, and Italy entered into the Locarno Pact on October 16, 1925, and it came into force on September 14, 1926, upon Germany’s entry into the League of Nations.

The General Pact for the Renunciation of War, also known as the Kellogg-Briand

¹⁹ Macmillan, *Winds of Change*, 346.

²⁰ Frederick C. Israel, ed., *Major Peace Treaties of Modern History 1648-1967*. Introductory Essay by Arnold Toynbee, 4 Volumes (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1967), 4: 2387.

Pact (for United States Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg and French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand) was a simple document that committed its adherents to “condemn recourse to war for the solution of international controversies, and renounce it as an instrument of national policy in their relations with one another,” in effect “outlawing” war.²² The Kellogg-Briand Pact was signed on August 27, 1928 by, among others, representatives of France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United States, and went into effect on March 2, 1929.²³ Whether the pact would be effective was an open question, but the idealism with which it was approached was certainly representative of the times.²⁴

The treaties affecting the Royal Navy most directly were the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922, the London Naval Treaties of 1930 and 1936, and, to a lesser extent, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935. The primary purpose of the first three was to limit the growth of naval forces among the leading naval powers of the world, namely Great Britain, the United States, Japan, France, and Italy. Results were mixed.

Signed in 1922, the Washington Naval Treaty was the first, most important, and in some ways the most successful of the treaties. The Washington Conference was called by President Warren G. Harding in response to an arms race that was already escalating to immense proportions only three years after the end of World War I. Great Britain, the United States, and Japan had embarked on programs of battleship construction that were

²¹ Charles I. Bevens, *Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States of America 1776-1949*, 13 Volumes (Washington, D.C.: Dept. of State, United States Government Printing Office, 1976), 13: 65. See also *Ibid.*, 2386.

²² Bevens, *Treaties and Other International Agreements*, 2: 734.

²³ *Ibid.*, 732. See also Schofield, *British Sea Power*, 103.

not only contrary to the spirit of the League of Nations, but potentially ruinous financially, especially to the English.

The Washington Naval Treaty placed a ten year moratorium on battleship construction, with limited exceptions, since the type was extremely expensive in terms of both money and manpower, as well as being the main fleet unit by which the relative strength of the competing powers was reckoned at the time. The treaty limited individual ship size, gun caliber, and total tonnage for battleships, total tonnage for aircraft carriers, and ship size and gun caliber for cruisers.²⁵ The treaty allotted total tonnage proportions of 10-10-6-3-3 to the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan, France, and Italy, respectively.²⁶ The agreement also curtailed the fortification of possessions in the Pacific Ocean and Far East, and, through a separate treaty negotiated at the same time, terminated the Anglo-Japanese alliance formed in 1911.²⁷

In some ways, the Washington treaty was successful. The battleship moratorium was effective and the limitations on cruisers more or less enforced.²⁸ The negotiations also set the tone for later agreements. On the other hand, because there were no limits placed on the number of cruisers that could be built, the signatories began construction of vessels of this type in some quantity. Japan quickly produced ships up to (and beyond)

²⁴ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914 - 1945* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 260.

²⁵ Bevens, *Treaties and Other International Agreements 2*: 353-355.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 334.

²⁸ Roskill. *Naval Policy*, 2: 371. The Japanese and Italian navies did not give out accurate information on the tonnage of their naval construction.

the limits of the treaty (10,000 tons, eight-inch guns), which in turn compelled the other signatories to follow suit. The result was a new, albeit more subtle, arms race.²⁹

For the Royal Navy, the effects of the Washington Naval Treaty were largely negative, for it initiated a trend toward negotiating away the former preponderance of strength England had enjoyed. While the negotiators had no crystal balls to refer to, Great Britain's foreign commitments nonetheless required a large navy, and the consequences of a substantial reduction in strength should have been easy to foresee. The never-ending conflict between economy and maintenance of strength was decided in favor of the accountants, leaving the navy to make do with far less. As for Britain's ending the alliance with Japan, the benefits largely accrued to the United States. Great Britain was left with reduced leverage to exert on Japan, the Japanese felt ill-treated, and the treaty limited Britain's ability to fortify its Pacific possessions.³⁰

The 1930 London Naval Treaty purported to correct the deficiencies of the Washington Naval Treaty by placing total tonnage limits on categories of vessels other than capital ships and aircraft carriers, particularly cruisers and destroyers, and also extended the battleship moratorium through 1936. For the first time the fact that the Royal Navy was no longer the preeminent naval force in the world was openly acknowledged, and the United States Navy, almost by default, took over the role of policing the Pacific.

Hit hard by fiscal and treaty constraints, the Royal Navy saw its strength further diluted. At the end of 1918, the fleet consisted of 58 capital ships (battleships and

²⁹ Schofield, *British Sea Power*, 102.

battlecruisers), 103 cruisers, 456 destroyers, and 122 submarines, plus assorted auxiliary and escort vessels, manned by nearly 450,000 officers and ratings, and operating on a budget of £334,091,000.³¹ While there was no reason to keep the fleet at wartime levels, by 1932 the size of the navy had dwindled to 12 battleships, 3 battle cruisers, 6 aircraft carriers, 52 cruisers, 150 destroyers, and 52 submarines, plus auxiliaries, manned by 89,667 officers and ratings, with a budget of £50,164,000.³² The numbers that stand out the most are those relating to capital ships, cruisers, and aircraft carriers.

In relation to other navies, the Royal Navy measured up well on paper. Its fifteen capital ships compared more than adequately to the ten of the Imperial Japanese Navy or the four of the Italian Navy, and with six aircraft carriers Britain had twice as many as Japan while Italy had none. With fifty-two cruisers, the Royal Navy had more than Japan and Italy combined (twenty-seven and seventeen, respectively).³³ Statistics can be deceptive, however.

Of Britain's fifteen capital ships, only three were built in the post-war years, and only two of those three were of a post-war design.³⁴ Of fifty-two cruisers, fewer than twenty were of post-war design, the balance being made up of ships of obsolescent design built for war use, with aging hulls and machinery and obsolete fire control

³⁰ Bevens, *Treaties and Other International Agreements*, 2: 356.

³¹ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 268. See also, see Roskill, *Naval Policy*, 2: 489.

³² Roskill, *Naval Policy*, 1: 575-576; *Naval Policy* Vol. 2: 489.

³³ Roskill, *Naval Policy*, 1: 575-576. By this time, the U.S. was not considered to be a likely opponent.

³⁴ Battlecruiser *Hood* (42,100 tons, 8 x 15-inch guns) was started during the war and completed in 1920. Battleships *Nelson* and *Rodney* (33,900 tons, 9 x 16-inch guns) were completed in 1927 under the terms of the Washington Naval treaty. The remaining capital ships, five *Queen Elizabeth* class and five *Royal Sovereign* class battleships, and two *Repulse* class battlecruisers were all completed no later than 1917. *Jane's Fighting Ships of World War II* (1947 New York: Random House, 1986), 23-29.

systems.³⁵ The number of cruisers was also inadequate, despite the apparent superiority over the two most likely opponents. The Admiralty had determined that seventy was the *minimum* number of cruisers needed to adequately carry out its assigned responsibilities, and the London Treaty reduced the Royal Navy to an eventual total of fifty.³⁶ When one takes into account the vast size of the British empire, and the maintenance-intensive nature of naval machinery, it is clear that the number of ships available to the fleet on paper was much greater than what might be available to the fleet at any given time and place.

Reducing the number of cruisers was especially hazardous. Because the advent of airpower had reduced the perceived role of the navy as the primary defender of the home islands, the navy's main mission became that of keeping the vital sea lines of communication open. Combining firepower, speed, endurance, and relative economy of production and operation, cruisers were the ideal units with which to accomplish the mission. By forcing the Royal Navy to make do with only fifty such vessels, Britain was obliged to withdraw forces from the more far-flung reaches of the empire to strengthen the Home and Mediterranean fleets, which in turn left Japan with a less obstructed field for its imperial ambitions in east Asia.³⁷

The second London Naval Treaty, signed in 1936, placed further restrictions on

³⁵ The war-built cruisers of the "C" and "D" classes displaced 4-5,000 tons, and mounted up to seven 6-inch guns. The latest World War I designs were actually completed in the 1920s and were slightly larger. The Washington treaty-built cruisers displaced 9-10,000 tons and mounted up to eight 8-inch guns. *Ibid.*, 44-51. Besides heavier armaments and better fire control, the newer ships were more weatherly and had much higher endurance, both important characteristics for patrolling the sea lanes for long distances.

³⁶ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 278, 284. See also, Roskill, *Naval Policy*, 2: 73. For text of treaty, see Bevens, *Treaties and Other International Agreements*, 3: 257-273.

³⁷ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 286.

the Royal Navy. Battleship construction was allowed, with some size and armament limitations continuing. Aircraft carriers, submarines, and light cruisers (those with a main armament consisting of guns of not more than 6.1 inches) were limited by size and armament, and new construction of heavy cruisers (eight-inch guns or larger) was disallowed altogether until 1943.³⁸ While provision was made for abrogating the treaty should it be thought necessary, and the British actually observed it for only a year or so, it deprived Britain of time which was badly needed by then to increase its naval forces in preparation for the war which was clearly approaching with Germany, or Italy, or Japan, or, in the worst case, some combination of the three.³⁹ From a naval standpoint, the United Kingdom thought it could handle Germany and Italy at the same time, but if Japan was introduced into the mix, The Royal Navy would find itself hard-pressed to make a good accounting of itself.⁴⁰ As a further indicator that the London treaty of 1936 was lacking in substance, it was signed only by the United Kingdom, the United States, and France; Italy and Japan were notably absent.

Meanwhile, the British had negotiated a naval treaty with Germany in 1935, openly acknowledging what had been going on for some time: the Germans had been rearming contrary to the Versailles Treaty. The Anglo-German Naval Treaty was also negotiated without the knowledge or approval of the French, and this omission caused considerable tension between the British and French.⁴¹

The treaty limited Germany to thirty-five percent of Britain's total naval

³⁸ Bevens, *Treaties and Other International Agreements*, 3: 261, 272.

³⁹ Hector Bywater, "Britain on the Seas" in *Foreign Affairs* 16 (October 1937): 221.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

tonnage, and allowed Germany to build U-boats openly for the first time since World War One. The total tonnage of German submarines “shall not exceed 45% of the total [submarine tonnage] of that possessed by the members of the British Commonwealth of Nations.”⁴² Britain also agreed to the following:

The German government reserve the right, in the event of a situation arising which in their opinion makes it necessary for Germany to avail herself of her right to a percentage of submarine tonnage exceeding the 45 percent above mentioned, to give notice to this effect to His Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom, and agree that the matter shall be the subject of friendly discussion before the German Government exercise that right.⁴³

In short, Britain gave Germany the right to build up to its naval capacity. At the time, German shipyards were incapable of producing anything like 35% of England’s naval tonnage in surface vessels. Production of items such as armor plate, naval cannon, and propulsive machinery, was in no way able to keep up with British yards.⁴⁴ Submarines, being relatively easy and cheap to build, were another matter, and the British gave Hitler their blessing to build to his heart’s content the one weapon that could seriously jeopardize the Royal Navy’s control of the shipping lanes. To be fair, the navy was under the misapprehension that the submarine threat had been contained, as mentioned earlier, and the reality of the situation was that England had two choices: they could

⁴¹ Macmillan, *Winds of Change*, 366-367.

⁴² League of Nations. *Treaty Series: Publication of Treaties and International Engagements Registered with the Secretariat of the League of Nations* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1920 - 1946), 161: 10-12.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Macmillan, *Winds of Change*, 367.

throw a diplomatic tantrum because Germany was ignoring the Versailles treaty (any military response was out of the question), or acknowledge the facts and try to control the outcome in their favor. That they made the latter choice is not surprising. That it was taken without consulting the French government was an error that doubly reinforced Hitler's hand: the Anglo-German Naval Pact of 1935 strengthened the *Kriegsmarine* and weakened British relations with France.⁴⁵

With all of the relevant treaties now in place, the true nature of Collective Security was showing itself. Indications of how fragile the concept of Collective Security really was appeared as early as the 1920s with wars in eastern and southeastern Europe, but became more compelling in 1931 when Japan occupied Manchuria.

In this first major blatant contravention of the League Covenant, to say nothing of numerous other treaties, the United Kingdom was caught in a three-way quandary: insufficient available force, major economic problems, and insufficient strength of opinion at home to force some kind of solution.⁴⁶ As a result, while it hardly made Japan the darling of world opinion, in the end Manchuria became Manchukuo and Japan took the first step toward control of China, while the League members discussed the issue, doubtless hoping the problem would go away. The Lytton Report of 1932 did condemn Japanese aggression, and Japan withdrew from the League, but members applied no sanctions of any kind against Japan beyond verbal disapproval.

Other faint warnings were also sounding. In 1933 in Germany Adolf Hitler took over as Chancellor, soon to be dictator. Set against the backdrop of economic disaster

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

and a rising Communist presence, the restoration of order in Germany under any guise allowed certain quirks in Hitler's personality to be overlooked. Hitler's bid to annex Austria in 1934 was thwarted only by pressure from England, France, and Italy at the Stresa Conference the same year. This fact might bolster the case for collective security, except that Mussolini in Italy was already casting covetous eyes at Ethiopia, and may have helped to stop Hitler only as a means to get the French and British to acquiesce to his attack on that east African nation at a later date.⁴⁷

Britain was also beset with revolts by Arabs in Palestine, nationalists in India, and further Japanese aggression in China, all of which stretched her diplomatically and militarily. As late as 1935 Neville Chamberlain delivered a speech that said in part:

. . . Britain's strongest interest lay in the preservation of peace, and it was a cardinal point in the Government's policy to strengthen and develop the League of Nations by all means in their power as the instrument, and the only effective instrument, for obtaining international cooperation.⁴⁸

By this time it should have been obvious that collective security, as then constructed, was a sham. Some notable voices, such as Churchill and Vansittart, counseled immediate rearmament and a foreign policy backed by strength, but they lacked influence in the Cabinet and could do no more than repeat the message and hope to be heard. The voters preferred the idealists, however, because the idealists promised to keep the specter of war at bay. It was this attitude of idealism, coupled with blindness to the weaknesses of the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 342.

⁴⁷ Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 66.

⁴⁸ *The Times* (London), February 23, 1935: 7.

League of Nations and to the blatant dishonesty of its potential opponents, which would lead Britain through some of its most difficult years.

CHAPTER 3

OPENING SHOTS: THE FIRST SEVEN WEEKS

JULY 18 - SEPTEMBER 8, 1936

Under normal circumstances, the opening of a civil war in Spain would have come as no surprise to anyone. The political and social situation in that country had been in a constant state of flux at least since the end of the Napoleonic wars, and could be considered chaotic since 1931, when King Alfonso XIII abdicated the throne and left the country in the hands of the Second Republic. Strikes, riots, and violence were a common feature of the national landscape for the years leading up to the revolt of 1936:

In the five years since that Spring day when Alfonso XIII was voted off his throne and the republic arrived in a whirl of confetti and paper hats, there have been three Congresses and five major uprisings: two from the Right, three from the Left. Each has been bigger and more desperately pitched than the one before.¹

Under normal circumstances, few foreign governments would have cared all that much about a civil war in Spain beyond the narrow confines of financial interests and the security of any citizens there at the time. Under normal circumstances, Spain would have remained isolated beyond the Pyrenees, and probably left to stew in its own juices as it had been for over a century.

¹ Anita Brenner, "Spain at Her Great Decision", in Gabriel Jackson, ed., *The Spanish Civil War* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1972), 36.

In July 1936, however, circumstances were anything but normal. The fact that the Nationalist revolt came as such a surprise to Europe was a reflection of the degeneration of European relations in general which had accelerated rapidly in the previous eight months. The fact that anyone cared was a reflection of the nature of the conflict itself which, to outward appearances, was a struggle between the forces of a freely elected parliamentary government and those of a fascist uprising. The fact that the war did not remain politically isolated was a reflection of the European political scene at the time, a scene in which the democracies, particularly Great Britain and France, found themselves increasingly at odds with the fascist dictatorships of Italy and Germany, with the Soviet Union as a relatively isolated and very concerned third party.

Early in 1935 there had been what seemed to be substantial advances in European relations. While Hitler had repudiated the disarmament clauses of the Versailles Treaty on March 16th, Britain, France, and Italy reinforced their opposition to Germany's 1934 designs on Austria with a formal declaration in April, arrived at as a result of another meeting at Stresa, in the Italian Alps. The statement affirmed the declarations made on February 17th and September 27th, 1934, in which the three governments

[R]ecognized that the necessity of maintaining the independence and integrity of Austria would continue to inspire their common policy The representatives of Italy and the United Kingdom . . . formally reaffirm all their obligations under [the Locarno] Treaty, and declare their intention . . . to faithfully execute them The three Powers, the object of whose policy is the collective maintenance of peace within the framework of the League of Nations, find themselves in

complete agreement in opposing, by all practicable means, any unilateral repudiation of treaties which may endanger the peace of Europe, and will act in close and cordial collaboration for this purpose.²

The Soviet Union was likewise deeply worried about Germany's resurgence. France saw the opportunity to shore up its own defenses, and together the two nations signed the Franco-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance on May 2nd. The treaty, which was to be of five years duration, stated in part:

In the event of France or the U.S.S.R. . . . being the object, in spite of the genuinely peaceful intentions of both countries, of an unprovoked attack on the part of a European State, the U.S.S.R. and, reciprocally France, shall immediately give the other aid and assistance.³

Thus the French and Soviets, in an apparent *redux* of their alliance of 1894, confronted Germany with the threat of another two-front war. Hitler responded by publicly professing an unquenchable desire for peace, while secretly reorganizing his armed forces and making plans for putting the Germany economy on a war footing.⁴

Finally, the British signed the aforementioned Anglo-German Naval Agreement in June, thinking that they were containing the worst part of the Teutonic threat.

² J. A. S. Grenville, *The Major International Treaties of 1914-1973. A History and Guide with Texts* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1974), 164.

³ League of Nations, *Treaty Series Publication of Treaties and International Engagements Registered with the Secretariat of the League of Nations*, 205 Volumes (London: Harrison & Sons, 1920 - 1946), 67: 404-406. It is interesting to note that this treaty was due to expire on May 2, 1940; Hitler invaded France and the Low Countries on May 10.

⁴ Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 328-329.

Although the hazards from German air power were still substantial, the British felt that by limiting a naval arms race they could concentrate on countering the aerial threat.⁵

By mid-1935, Germany appeared to be surrounded and its immediate possibilities neutralized. In a graphic illustration of the old adage about politics making strange bedfellows, the democracies of France and Great Britain combined with a fascist dictatorship and a communist dictatorship to counter the danger posed by yet another dictatorship. “Collective Security” seemed to be safe, the League secure despite the withdrawal of Japan and Germany, and yet another crisis averted. If the situation appeared too good to be true, it is because it was too good to be true.

Mussolini destroyed the illusion. His desire for greatness, both personal and national, had him looking southward for new military and colonial opportunities. Specifically, he looked at Ethiopia as a prime target. Bordering two Italian colonies, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland, Ethiopia’s combination of backwardness and non-white leadership gave it two desirable characteristics: on the one hand, its primitive nature would presumably make for an easy conquest; and on the other, the racial content of the population would make white Europeans less concerned about its subjugation.⁶ Both England and France warned Mussolini against this aggression, but both needed Italy to

⁵ Anthony Eden, *The Eden Memoirs: Facing the Dictators* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1939), 258-259.

⁶ Denis Mack-Smith, *Mussolini’s Roman Empire* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 59-62. Mussolini also wanted to avenge a military defeat at the hands of Ethiopia at the Battle of Adowa in 1896. *Ibid.*, 68. See also, Harold Macmillan, *Winds of Change* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 378.

offset Germany, so neither made much of the Italian dictator's ambition when they had the chance at Stresa.⁷

Mussolini's appetite for conquest created very serious problems for the League, because both Italy and Ethiopia were member nations, and according to the Covenant, "[S]hould any Member resort to war [against another member]. . . it shall *ipso facto* be deemed to have committed an act of war against all other Members . . ."⁸ Oddly, it was Italy that had sponsored Ethiopia for admission to the League in 1923, over British objections.⁹

In any event, Mussolini went ahead and invaded Ethiopia at the beginning of October, 1935. He correctly measured the lack of resolution of Britain and France, and by extension that of the League. Economic sanctions proposed, and accepted, by the League were ineffective, and while European opinion was largely against him, Mussolini simply ignored it.¹⁰ The end results were the breaking up of the "Stresa Front" against Hitler, Italy's movement toward alliance with Germany, and, most important, it reinforced the image of the League of Nations as an institution powerless in preventing aggression.

The next major crisis arrived on March 7, 1936, when Adolf Hitler violated both the Versailles Treaty and the Locarno Pact by reoccupying the Rhineland. Hitler's timing

⁷ Macmillan, *Winds of Change*, 379-380. See also, Winston S. Churchill, *The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), 167-168, and Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 200.

⁸ Sir Geoffrey Butler, *A Handbook to the League of Nations with a Chronological Record of its Achievement Brought down to April 1928* (London: Longmans, Green And Co. Ltd., 1928), 158.

⁹ Churchill, *Gathering Storm*, 166.

was just about perfect. The French were under a caretaker government, with elections due to be held in April. In England, King George V had died on January 20 and this event, coupled with the Ethiopian situation, meant that British attention was focused elsewhere. Also, the British had held general elections, only days after the invasion of Ethiopia, resulting in the reelection of Stanley Baldwin as Prime Minister and a Conservative Party majority of 247 seats in the House of Commons, the largest majority since the end of the war.

Baldwin, a consummate politician, had garnered votes by playing on the fears of both the pacifists and supporters of rearmament: “Thus the votes both of those who sought to see the nation prepare itself against the dangers of the future and of those who believed that peace could be gained by praising its virtues, were gained.”¹¹

When Nazi forces entered the Rhineland, Hitler correctly guessed that neither France nor England would react forcefully.¹² Both tried resorting to the League of Nations, with predictable results: a lot of talk and no action. Italy was out of the picture as a possible counter to Germany; in fact Italy, was actually drawing closer to alliance with Germany because of League sanctions stemming from the invasion of Ethiopia. Britain and France were on their own. The French deferred to British policy, and British policy was the avoidance of war at all cost.¹³ These two events, the Ethiopia invasion

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 175-176.

¹¹ Churchill, *Gathering Storm*, 180.

¹² Bullock, *Hitler*, 343. If Hitler had been forcefully opposed, he would have had to back down, and in all probability his government would have fallen.

¹³ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 383-386. Also, Macmillan, *Winds of Change*, 422-424.

and the reoccupation of the Rhineland, mortally wounded “Collective Security” and the League of Nations.

The French elections of April and May, 1936, brought a leftist Popular Front government to power, with Léon Blum as Prime Minister. Blum’s position was not very secure, and he encountered significant opposition from conservative elements within the government.¹⁴

This, then, was the situation the British government faced at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Focusing primarily on the activities of the Italian and German dictators, with the Locarno Pact dead and the League of Nations nearly so, and a weak government in France, the Foreign Office had more than enough to deal with. That the conflict in Spain came as a surprise then was not in itself surprising.¹⁵

The immediate pressures that exploded into war in Spain built up from 1930 onwards. The First Republic existed as a constitutional monarchy from 1876 to 1923, when General Antonio Primo de Rivera established a fairly benevolent dictatorship which lasted until 1930.¹⁶ When the Second Republic came into being with the elections of 1931, divisions between Right and Left became more stark.

The Right coalesced around four main factions: monarchists, large landowners and businessmen, the Catholic Church hierarchy, and senior army officers. The left was

¹⁴ Joel Colton, *Léon Blum: Humanist in Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 237.

¹⁵ Great Britain. Cabinet Office. Cabinet Minutes and Memoranda. Public Record Office (Kew), London, England. Cabinet 7(36), 19 February, 1936. Cab.23/83. Cabinet 42(36), 17 June, 1936; Cabinet 43(36), 23 June 1936. Cab. 23/84. Hereafter referred to as CMM. The fact that the British government was caught off-guard by the events in Spain can be inferred from the complete lack of any references to Spain in the minutes of the Cabinet meetings from the first of the year up to the actual outbreak of the Nationalist rebellion. Cabinets 1(36) through 43(36). Cab. 23/83 and Cab. 23/84.

made up of everything from “New Deal” type republicans to socialists, communists, and anarchists. Something else to be taken into account were the strong separatist feelings prevalent in the northern Basque province and the northeastern province of Catalonia, each with a distinct language and culture. The Basque region contained a substantial part of the nation’s industrial and mining base, which might lead one to think that they would tend to support the Right. The Left, however, was more amenable to autonomy for the separatist regions whereas the Right would countenance nothing of the kind. Catalonia encompassed the greater part of Spain’s textile industry as well as several of its major ports and the second largest city in Spain, Barcelona. It was also the seat of the Spanish Anarchist movement, which counted some 1.5 million members.¹⁷

A series of attempted *pronunciamientos* (military coups) from the right and attempted revolutions from the left flared up during the years 1931 - 1935. The most serious of these, a rising of miners in the northern province of Astúrias, was put down in a violent and bloody fashion by troops led by General Francisco Franco, a hero who had established his reputation with action against insurgents in Spanish Morocco during the 1920s.

As 1936 approached, the ideological gap between Right and Left widened to a chasm, which was reflected in the elections of February, 1936. The leftist Popular Front

¹⁶ Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, Revised and Enlarged Edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 193. See also, Jackson, *The Spanish Civil War*, 3.

¹⁷ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 70. Only about 200,000 of these were “militants.”

polled 34.3% of the electorate (4,654,116 votes), the rightist National Front polled 33.2% (4,503,505 votes), and the Center parties polled 5.4% (526,615 votes).¹⁸ These figures are based on a total electorate of some 13.5 million voters, about 27% of whom abstained.¹⁹ The Popular Front garnered 263 seats in the *Córtes* (Parliament), Nationalists 133, and Centrists 77, with 20 seats still disputed and left to be decided in a later election.²⁰

The variety of organizations representing the multitude of political factions was mind-boggling, but worth describing at some length. On the Right were CEDA (*Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas*), the Catholic Party; JAP (*Juventud de Acción Popular*), the Catholic Action Youth Movement; JONS (*Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista*), a Fascist group; UME (*Unión Militar Española*), a Right-wing military officer's group; and the Falange, a militant Nationalist-Fascist group. The Left consisted of the CNT (*Confederación Nacional de Trabajo*), the Anarcho-Syndicalist Trade Union; FAI (*Federación Anarquista Ibérica*), the Anarchist Doctrinal Vanguard; FIJL (*Federación Ibérica de Juventudes Libertarias*), an Anarchist youth organization; JSU (*Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas*), a socialist youth movement; POUM (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*), a group of anti-Stalinist communists; JCI (*Juventud Comunista Ibérica*), the youth wing of the POUM; PSUC (*Partido Socialista Unificado de Cataluña*), the Catalán Communist Party; UGT (*Unión General de Trabajadores*), the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁰ *Ibid.* The final results are immaterial because they did not affect the balance in the *Cortes*.

Socialist Trade Union; and UMRA (*Unión Militar Republicana Antifascista*), a Republican military officer's group.²¹

Thus, when the *Córtes* met, the vast majority of the representation came from the extremes of the political spectrum, with any moderating influence from the center virtually nonexistent. Spain could not have arrived at a better recipe for disaster if it had done so intentionally.

Factional violence escalated virtually from the moment the election results came in. Rumors of another *pronunciamiento* circulated. General Franco, "exiled" to a command in the Canary Islands for his role in putting down the Astúrian miners strike of 1934, warned president Manuel Azaña of the dangers in the offing and was ignored.²² Armed groups of militants from both sides roamed freely. Murder begat counter-murder in a cycle that escalated to anarchy.²³ Rightist army officers plotted a *pronunciamiento* and scheduled it to take place on July 18th. They wanted a quick stroke, but did not count on the depth of resistance that was to rise up against them.²⁴

The catalyst for the revolt came with the murder of José Calvo Sotelo, the leader of the Parliamentary opposition, on the night of July 13th. Sotelo was kidnapped and killed by a number of "assault guards" (*asáltos* - paramilitary Leftists) in retaliation for the murder of a Republican army officer, Lt. José Castillo, by a group of Falange gunmen

²¹ *Ibid.*, xiii. This list only includes the major political organizations involved, and is by no means complete.

²² *Ibid.*, 205.

²³ Not "anarchism", in the way desired by the Anarchist organizations. See Herbert L. Matthews, "Anarchism: Spain's Enigma", in Jackson, *The Spanish Civil War*, 133.

²⁴ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 167. Franco was just one of a group of senior officers involved in the *pronunciamiento*, and did not become the undisputed leader of the rebellion until later.

on July 12th.

Though the conspiracy had been so long discussed, Calvo Sotelo's death really decided the plotters to go ahead; otherwise they might not have screwed up their courage to the sticking point. Now if they had not acted, they might have been brushed aside by their followers.²⁵

From this point on there was no turning back for Franco and his co-conspirators.

The rebellion broke out on July 18th in Morocco, the Balearics, and the Canary Islands. Franco arrived at Ceuta, in Morocco, on the morning of the 19th to assume command of the Foreign Legion and Moorish *Regulares* (Regulars) stationed there. Also on the 19th, the rebellion erupted in numerous major cities and army garrisons throughout Spain itself. The government did not react until it was almost too late. Confusion abounded. In the capital, Madrid, the distribution of 65,000 rifles to worker's groups to oppose the revolt was hampered by the fact that all but 5,000 of the weapons had no bolts; the bolts were stored at the Montaña garrison, which was in rebellion.²⁶ Fighting broke out in the streets of Barcelona, with heavy casualties.

The conflict had a naval aspect to it right from the start. Spain's long coastline, including foreign and island possessions nearby, and its fairly strong navy, guaranteed some naval activity. The Spanish fleet consisted of two old battleships, five light cruisers ranging from obsolescent World War I era ships to the more modern *Almirante Cervera* class, twenty-one destroyers of recent vintage, twelve submarines, and a varied collection

of patrol boats and gunboats, plus two new heavy cruisers of the *Baleares* class completing at Ferrol, in Galicia.²⁷

Upon learning of the uprisings on the 18th, Loyalist Minister of Marine José Giral ordered three destroyers to Morocco from Cartagena to establish a presence. When the ship's officers tried to go over to the rebel side, the crews of two of the vessels disagreed, took over command, and returned to Cartagena. The third ship, the *Churruca*, joined the rebellion and, together with the gunboat *Dato*, sailed into Melilla.²⁸

For the Nationalist rebels, the only substantial units of organized troops sat in North Africa, awaiting transport across the Straits of Gibraltar. Some 32,000 strong, the Spanish Foreign Legion and Moorish regulars were disciplined, battle-tested veterans of the Moroccan campaigns of the 1920s, loyal to Franco, and gave the rebels their best chance to win quickly, if they could get across.²⁹ All that the rebels needed were some ships and a brief period of control in which to perform the troop transfer. But, in an example of astoundingly poor planning, the rebels had made little effort to bring the navy in on the plot.³⁰ Fortunately for the plotters, and unfortunately for many naval officers, a

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 230-231.

²⁷ Stephen W. Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars* 2 Volumes (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 2: 370. Hereafter referred to as *Naval Policy*, 2. See also, Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 332. The two battleships, *Jaime I* and *España*, of about 15,000 tons, had been built before World War I. The new vessels of the *Baleares* class were 33-knot, 10,000 ton cruisers mounting eight - 8" guns, and were comparable to the latest British cruisers of similar type (they were in fact designed by the same people). The three *Almirante Cervera* class ships displaced about 8,000 tons, were also capable of 33 knots, and mounted eight 6" guns. The majority of Spain's destroyers were comparable to the latest British designs, about 1,350 tons, mounting four or five 5" guns, eight torpedo tubes, and capable of around 35 knots.

²⁸ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 243.

²⁹ Roskill, *Naval Policy*, 2: 371.

³⁰ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 212.

large number of the navy's officers found themselves to be ideological soulmates of the Nationalists.

The Spanish fleet was in an uproar. Minister Giral sent orders to all vessels to support the government, and encouraged the crews to take over if the commanders tried to rebel.³¹ Violence broke out aboard many ships, with the crews mostly overpowering the officers and appointing committees to act in the officers' stead. Aboard the cruiser *Miguel de Cervantes*, bound for Morocco from Ferrol, the officers resisted literally to the last man. Overall, of some 675 officers on active duty at the time of the revolt, about 230 were either killed outright by their ship's crews, or imprisoned and later shot.³²

When the dust finally settled, the government still controlled the lion's share of the fleet, with the rebels possessing only one of the battleships, two cruisers, two destroyers, two submarines, and seventeen smaller vessels. Ferrol, the main naval base and shipyard, fell to the rebels after heavy fighting, and with it the two new heavy cruisers fitting out there. Most crucial was the fact that the rebels retained the services of most of those officers who survived the early fighting, and that gave the Nationalists a semblance of efficiency in those few ships they had. The Republican ships, largely commanded by committees of enlisted men, were in no way a cohesive force. Thus at the critical moment, the government controlled the physical assets that could be used to prevent the movement of Franco's troops, but lacked the experience needed to employ them effectively. The two vessels at Franco's immediate disposal, the destroyer

³¹ *Ibid.*, 243.

³² *Ibid.*, 243 n1.

Churruca and gunboat *Dato*, unloaded the first 200 North African troops at Cádiz on the morning of the 19th, and returned to Melilla for more.

One major asset retained in the government's control was the air force. Not only did most of the equipment stay in Loyalist service, but so did most of the officers. Of the two hundred forty available pilots, only about ninety went with the rebellion, and only about one-third of the available aircraft went with them, mostly some old light-attack types. All of the fighter planes, as well as most of the attack aircraft and transports, remained with the government.³³ Although the Spanish air force was not particularly impressive to begin with, consisting as it did of outdated equipment, the roughly two hundred machines available to the government represented the only offensive weapon that might be used quickly and effectively. By using the Loyalist fleet, even in its diminished state, in conjunction with the air force, the government hoped to impede Franco's crossing to Spain.

Meanwhile, the news coming out of Spain was bad and getting worse. Reports of widespread fighting, as well as atrocities committed by both sides, caused a great deal of concern in London as well as the other capitals of Europe. International involvement in the developing situation was inevitable. The timing of the rebellion, at the height of the tourist season, meant that large numbers of foreigners were trapped and needed help getting out; that became the first order of business.³⁴ Britain initially developed a two-

³³ *Ibid.*, 330-331.

³⁴ "The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War," [1938] ADM 116/3677, Great Britain, Admiralty, Public Record Office, London (Kew), England.

tiered working policy. The main objective remained the extraction of as many of her nationals as wanted to leave, and the second objective was the protection of British shipping around Spain, particularly in the Straits of Gibraltar where what would come to be called an “air-sea battle” had developed on a minor scale.³⁵ Obviously, the job fell to the Royal Navy, which responded with remarkable quickness.

The Royal Navy was well placed to react to a crisis in Spain. The Mediterranean Fleet, based on Malta, had been temporarily augmented because of crises in the eastern Mediterranean over the previous year, specifically the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and Arab unrest in Palestine. On July 10th the navy announced that the Mediterranean Fleet was returning to normal levels after an extended period of heightened alert status, so there were ships available that were in transit back to home bases.³⁶ The naval base at Gibraltar made an excellent focal point for naval forces on the southern and eastern Spanish coasts. Spain’s location placed it squarely between the two main British naval forces, the Home Fleet and the Mediterranean Fleet, making the division of responsibility a fairly easy matter, with the Home Fleet taking charge of operations on the northern coast from the French border to the Portuguese border, and the Mediterranean Fleet responsible for the coastline from the southern Portuguese border around the Straits of Gibraltar and along Spain’s Mediterranean coast.³⁷ The proximity of available ships and bases made the Royal Navy’s mission much less complicated than it would have

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *The Times* (London), July 10, 1936, 12.

³⁷ “The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War”, Adm. 116/3677. PRO.

otherwise been in a situation that was already complicated enough.

The British Admiralty showed enough prescience to recognize that it would be called on, and began immediate preparations. The alert went out to the two main fleets on July 18th that a crisis was brewing, and on the 19th two destroyers en route to England from the eastern Mediterranean, *Whitehall* and *Wild Swan*, received orders to remain at Gibraltar in anticipation of some sort of response.³⁸ By the 20th most of Spain was in chaos and refugees began to appear in large numbers at border crossings and at the British territory of Gibraltar.³⁹ There were more than two thousand Britons known to be in Spain, but it was

. . . [Q]uite impossible to form any very definite idea either of the size or complexity of the commitment involved. Foreign tourists are seldom, and permanent residents abroad not always, registered with their consuls, and, at any given time, the numbers and whereabouts of the former are almost equally unknown.⁴⁰

The official orders came down the same day for evacuation efforts to get underway. In conjunction with embassy and consular personnel, the Royal Navy laid on an impressive sea lift to extract foreigners trapped in the violence.

By July 21st, six destroyers and three cruisers had arrived on station, with more ships on the way. On the Biscay coast, destroyers *Witch* and *Wren* arrived at Ferrol and Corunna, respectively. Further south, cruiser *Amphion* entered Teneriffe in the Canaries,

³⁸ *The Times* (London), July 20, 1936: 11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, July 21, 1936: 10.

⁴⁰ "The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War", ADM 116/3677. PRO.

cruiser *Orion* made stops at Barcelona and Palma de Majorca, while destroyers *Keppel* and *Whitshead* were at Vigo, *Shamrock* was at Málaga, and *Whitehall* was at Tangier. The heavy cruisers *London* and *Devonshire* were dispatched to Gibraltar, as was the battlecruiser *Repulse*, which carried two battalions of Gordon Highlanders to further increase security at that valuable base.⁴¹

On the 22nd, *Devonshire*, having arrived at Gibraltar, was ordered to Palma, and destroyers *Kieth*, *Bodicea*, *Basilisk*, *Verity*, and *Wishart* steamed for Valencia, Alicante, Almería, San Sebastián, Gijón, and Bilbao, respectively, the latter three ports being located on the Biscay coast. A squadron composed of the heavy cruiser *London*, accompanied by the destroyers *Douglas*, *Garland*, *Gipsy*, and *Gallant* steamed for Barcelona, where the uprising had failed and those associated with it were being rounded up and executed. Just four days into the war, the Royal Navy could boast of nineteen units on duty around Spain, five cruisers and fourteen destroyers.⁴²

As the Royal Navy continued to move forces into the area, evacuations proceeded at ports all along the Spanish coast. On the 23rd, the destroyers *Vanity* and *Veteran* extracted some three hundred people from the northern port of San Sebastián to the French port of St. Jean de Luz, just across the border.⁴³ The small French town, insignificant at any other time, became quite important to naval operations as the war ground on. At the same time, on the other side of the country, cruiser *London* and

⁴¹ *The Times* (London), July 22, 1936: 9. See Map 1 for locations of ports listed.

⁴² *Ibid.*, July 23, 1936: 11. Also, "The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War", ADM 116/3677. PRO.

⁴³ *The Times* (London), July 25, 1936: 12.

destroyer leader *Douglas* moved about one hundred fifty evacuees from Barcelona to Marseilles, while the destroyer leader *Kieth* was ordered to Valencia.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, British naval patrols along the Straits of Gibraltar found themselves in a sticky position, caught between two warring factions, but nonetheless behaved with commendable restraint. On at least five occasions shots were fired at, or bombs dropped on, British naval vessels during the opening days of the war, fortunately with no casualties.⁴⁵ On the 23rd, the destroyer *Shamrock* found herself the object of attention for a flight of Republican bombers, and received some splinter damage from a near miss.⁴⁶

The position of foreign shipping passing through the Straits at such a time was bound to involve a certain degree of danger, more especially since, as it proved, both combatants, in the heat of the moment, proved apt to fire first and ask questions afterward.⁴⁷

With Spanish naval vessels from both sides lurking in the area, the Republican air force making its presence known, and the large volume of commercial traffic from many nations attempting passage through the bottleneck at the western end of the Mediterranean, the delicate position of the Royal Navy can be readily appreciated. The forbearance exhibited by the officers and ratings in an effort to keep the conflict localized showed the highest standards of professionalism and training.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* Destroyer leaders were little different from regular destroyers, except that they were designed with additional accommodations for the squadron commander, usually a Captain, designated Captain (D), and his staff.

⁴⁵ "The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War", ADM 116/3677. PRO.

⁴⁶ *Times*, July 24, 1936: 13. The attacks on British destroyers were easy to understand, because they were generally similar in appearance to those of the Spanish Navy, and so were easily confused with legitimate targets. Determining the nationality of merchant vessels was probably an even harder task. See also, "The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War", ADM 116/3677. PRO.

On the diplomatic front, the situation was just as touchy. Both sides in the war realized early on that there would be no early resolution, which meant that both would need infusions of war matériel to keep up their efforts. The Nationalists put feelers out to Italy and Germany before the outbreak of hostilities, which paid off handsomely in the long run. Mussolini had in fact been sending aid to Nationalist organizations for some years; even so, he too was caught by surprise when the fighting started and initially refused to help. Hitler was likewise surprised, but agreed to assist the Nationalists readily enough. Not wanting to be outdone, Mussolini changed his mind when informed that Germany would send aid.⁴⁸

The first installment of German aid consisted of some Junkers Ju-52 transport aircraft, desperately needed to ferry troops to Spain from Morocco. The first of the trimotor airplanes arrived on July 28th, with more following until the initial batch numbered some twenty machines, each with a capacity of about twenty troops. With this augmented airlift capability, the Nationalists were able to ferry 13,523 troops into Spain between July 29th and October 11th.⁴⁹ After overcoming his initial reluctance, Mussolini started the flow of aid that began as a trickle, soon to increase to a torrent. Like the Germans, Italy's first contribution consisted of some transport aircraft. Together the Germans and Italians, especially the latter, became the primary sources for weapons and munitions for the Nationalist war effort. Germany supplied the implements of war and a

⁴⁷ "The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War", ADM 116/3677. PRO.

⁴⁸ Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, 99.

⁴⁹ Robert H. Whealey, *Hitler and Spain: The Nazi Role in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 101

relatively small number of pilots, technicians, and observers. Italy provided the same type of aid plus a lot more, sending large numbers of troops to supplement the matériel.

The Spanish Republican government turned to France as a first recourse to supply its effort. Like Spain, France had a Popular Front government, so Prime Minister Girál – elevated from Minister of Marine after Cásares Quiroga resigned on July 19th – naturally thought that Premier Blum of France would be sympathetic to the plight of the Republicans. While Blum was sympathetic, and responded favorably at first to Girál’s request for aircraft and weapons, Blum’s freedom of action was severely limited by the very strong opposition of right-wing elements in the French government and the press. Blum agreed to a substantial infusion of aircraft, arms, and munitions on the 20th, and informed the Spanish ambassador of his intentions, at the same time trying to keep his intentions quiet.⁵⁰ The attempt at subtlety was futile. Word emerged in the French press on the 23rd, in at least one case accusing Blum of treason.⁵¹

To the French Right the specter of a “communist” triumph in Spain was more to be dreaded than the prospects of a fascist-type dictatorship even if installed with German and Italian support.⁵²

The reaction to his pledge to rearm the Spanish Republic led Blum to retract it. Eventually Blum and his Foreign Minister, Yvon Delbos, hit on the idea of strict neutrality, or non-intervention, as the only means to placate the opposition and forestall

⁵⁰ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 343.

⁵¹ Colton, *Léon Blum*, 237.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 236.

even more serious divisions within France. Blum was not blind to the possibility that France could end up in the same situation as Spain.

The Soviet Union, while sympathetic to the Republican cause, was in a poor position to do anything about it. The idea of a Popular Front, a unification of Marxist and democratic parties to oppose the rise of fascist dictatorships, had found support from the Communist International, and feeling ran strong in favor of the Loyalists.⁵³ But Josef Stalin had his own problems at the time and was busy purging the Soviet government of “undesirable elements”. So while he did not discourage “private” aid in the form of workers’ drives to raise money, arms, and volunteers, official aid from Russia was virtually nonexistent in the opening weeks of the conflict. Stalin later saw the political and military benefits of helping the Republic, and substantial amounts of military supplies began arriving in October.⁵⁴

Of the five major European powers, only Great Britain felt no ideological or political compulsion to take sides in the Spanish conflict. When the Spanish Ambassador to England approached the Foreign Office to inquire about purchasing oil at the naval base at Gibraltar to fuel the Spanish fleet, he was told to try private sources.⁵⁵ The British policy was that private individuals or companies could not be prevented from doing business, but the government refused to get involved on either side.⁵⁶ The

⁵³ Jackson, *The Spanish Civil War*, 8.

⁵⁴ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 440.

⁵⁵ Foreign Office minute by Lord Cranborne, July 21, 1936. Great Britain. Foreign Office. *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919 - 1939* Second Series, Volume 17: *Western Pact Negotiations: Outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, June 23, 1936 - January 2, 1937*. W. M. Medlicott and Douglas Dakin, eds. (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1979), 8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

internationalization of the conflict did not allow the British to maintain this “cash and carry” policy for very long, so when the French proposed the idea of non-intervention on August 2nd, they found ready support from the Baldwin administration, and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden took a lead role in implementing it.⁵⁷ Great Britain was unprepared either militarily or psychologically to go to the brink over Spain, yet the possibility of a wider European war was inherent in virtually any active involvement in the conflict; complete non-involvement carried potentially negative consequences for British credibility and prestige; a policy of non-intervention by Britain and France, provided it could be extended to include the other major powers of Europe, showed some hope of preventing the spread of violence beyond Spain’s borders.

[T]he British Government had no wish to be involved in a Spanish civil war, nor were they convinced that, whatever its outcome, the Spaniards would feel any gratitude to those who had intervened. This lesson had been learnt in the Peninsular War more than a century before, when British soldiers and statesmen found their allies brave, but proud, unpunctual and xenophobe. The question now was whether a non-intervention policy could be made effective; it had to be tried.⁵⁸

Even though His Majesty’s Government was not convinced that a fascist government in Spain would allow Germany and Italy to use its territory for their own ends, the possibility still had to be acknowledged. Italian naval strength in the Mediterranean was sufficient to threaten the Suez Canal and France’s maritime connection to Algeria – a

⁵⁷ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 451.

significant source of troop reinforcements in case of war in Europe. Relations between Italy and Germany had improved markedly since the Ethiopian crisis of 1935, and it certainly went against British interests to see that trend continue. But above all, Britain did not want the war in Spain to widen and engulf all of Europe. Pursuing these concerns, the British and French placed an embargo on arms to Spain on August 15th. At the same time, both countries formalized the Non-Intervention policy by publishing identical diplomatic notes that pledged to “abstain from all interference, direct or indirect” in Spanish internal affairs.⁵⁹

British and French efforts to include other countries soon bore fruit, with Germany agreeing on the 17th, Italy on the 21st, and the Soviet Union on the 23rd. More governments came on board until a total of twenty-six were represented. At this point England took the lead, at France’s urging. A committee was formed, to meet in London, with the purpose of overseeing the implementation of the Non-Intervention policy. The Non-Intervention Committee set its first meeting for September 9, 1936.⁶⁰

While the diplomats busied themselves trying to contain the Spanish war, the Royal Navy continued its buildup, and its evacuation and patrol operations. By the middle of August, thirty-three naval vessels were operating on the Spanish coast, consisting of the battleship *Queen Elizabeth*, battlecruiser *Repulse*, cruisers *London*, *Devonshire*, *Shropshire*, *Amphion*, and *Galatea*, and twenty-six destroyers and destroyer leaders. These ships generally operated singly or in pairs, covering most of the ports

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Wm. Laird Kleine-Ahlbrandt, *The Policy of Simmering: A Study of British Foreign Policy During the Spanish Civil War* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), 11.

along the coast of Spain, the main exception being Barcelona, where a squadron of up to six ships maintained a presence.⁶¹ This force represented a substantial part of the Royal Navy's total strength, and may have provided a convincing, if unintended, show of British resolve.⁶²

The majority of civilians requiring evacuation were removed by the end of September, but those proceedings continued until the end of October, by which time 11,195 evacuees were extracted, only some 35% of whom were British subjects.⁶³ While the sealift was expensive in terms of ships occupied, manpower used, and money spent, it paid off to some extent in good will. The French, Italians, Germans, and Americans also had naval forces in the area performing similar tasks, but those never approached the British in numbers. Messages of appreciation for the Royal Navy's efforts flowed in from around the world.⁶⁴ All told, Royal Navy ships made 220 evacuation voyages, representing 75,724 miles steamed. The difficulties encountered cannot be underestimated. Providing for the comfort of large numbers of civilians aboard naval vessels already quite crowded with their own crews was no simple matter, but the crews of the ships made every effort to see that their charges were well looked after, and the gratitude expressed by many governments reflected the organization and morale of the Royal Navy.⁶⁵ For the rest of the Spanish Civil War, the navy's prestige never regained

⁶⁰ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 457.

⁶¹ *The Times* (London), July 31 - August 14, 1936. The figure of "up to" six ships was taken from articles printed on the days noted.

⁶² Kleine-Ahlbrandt, *The Policy of Simmering*, 11. According to the author, the large British naval presence on the coast of Spain may have caused Hitler to proceed more cautiously in his Spanish policy.

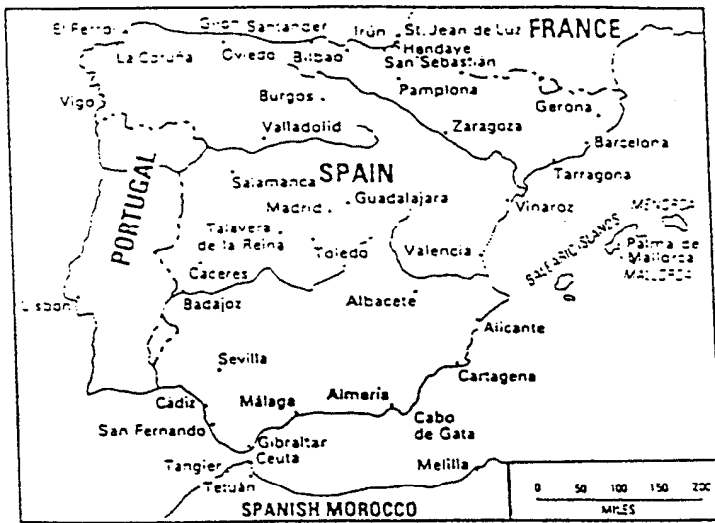
⁶³ "The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War", ADM 116/3677. PRO.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

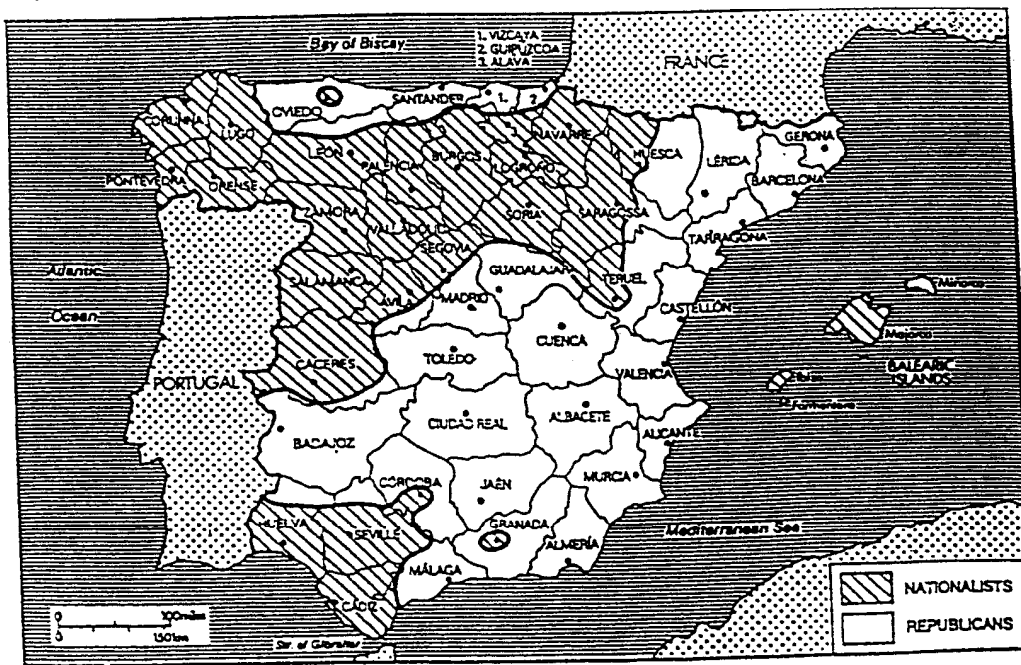
the heights that it achieved during the first few weeks. From September, 1936, until the war's end in April, 1939, while the Royal Navy's numbers in the area decreased considerably, the mission became much more ambiguous and therefore much more difficult to perform. The clarity of the task of evacuating civilians in danger was replaced by the murkiness, magnified by diplomatic maneuverings, of enforcing the Non-Intervention Agreement.

Map 1: The Iberian Peninsula in 1936.



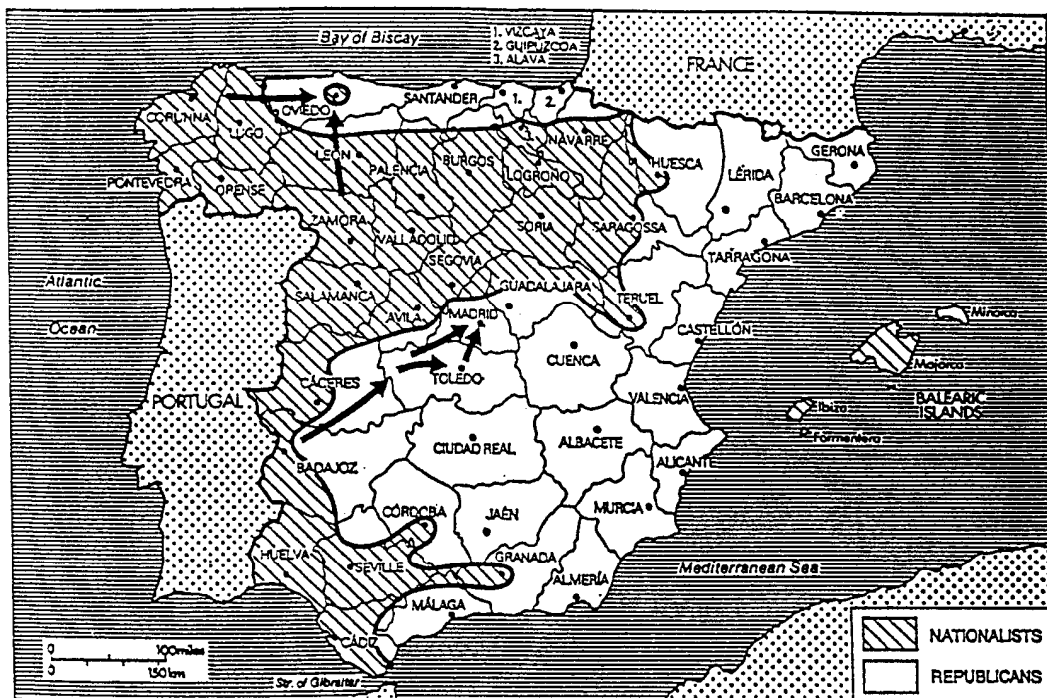
Robert H. Whealey, *Hitler and Spain: The Nazi Role in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), x, map 1.

Map 2: The division of Spain at the end of July, 1936.



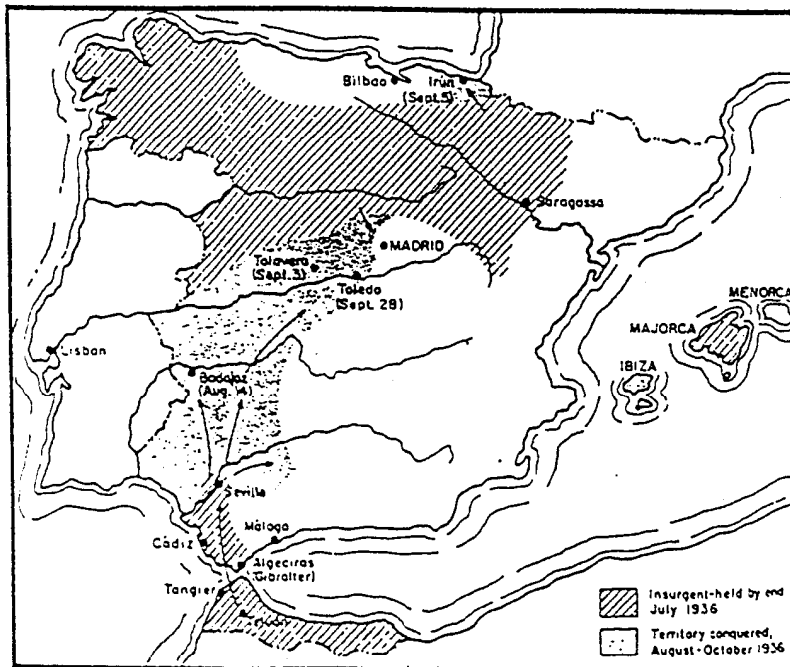
Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, Revised and Enlarged Edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 256, map 9

Map 3: The division of Spain, August, 1936.



Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, Revised and Enlarged Edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 402, map 15.

Map 4: The division of Spain, October, 1936.



Robert H. Whealey. *Hitler and Spain: The Nazi Role in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 6, map 2.

CHAPTER 4

INTERVENTION AND NON-INTERVENTION

SEPTEMBER 9, 1936 - MAY 28, 1937

On the eve of the inaugural meeting of the Non-Intervention Committee, the situation in Spain remained fluid. Insurgent forces made substantial gains in the north and northwest. The North African territories, the Canary Islands, and some of the Balearics were likewise in rebel hands. General Franco established a foothold around Cadiz which he used as a base for thrusts toward the north and east by his well-trained and well-equipped forces. The Republican navy reached a point where the problems of leadership, crew quality, and material shortages accumulated to such an extent that it became largely ineffective in preventing the Nationalists from gaining sufficient control of the Straits of Gibraltar to begin shipping the balance of the North African troops and equipment to Spain, although the waters around Spain remained hazardous.¹ On the front lines, the Nationalists were better armed and organized, but lacked the strength to achieve their aims quickly. Conversely, the Republicans had plenty of people on their side, as well as control of most of Spain's industrial infrastructure, but were poorly organized, equipped, and led. Violence behind the lines on both sides continued unabated.

Faced with this situation, diplomats from twenty-six countries met in London on September 9, 1936, in order to give some substance to the statements in support of the

policy of Non-Intervention.² The original statement of Non-Intervention, agreed upon and repeated almost verbatim by the governments of both Britain and France, consisted of a preamble stating that the two would “abstain rigorously from all interference . . . direct or indirect, in the internal affairs of Spain, on the basis of the desire to avoid complications prejudicial to the good relations between their peoples.”³ In more concrete terms, the idea was to prevent the ingress of arms to either side of the conflict by forbidding any arms or munitions to be exported or re-exported to Spain, by terminating contracts pending or in execution, and by keeping the other governments involved in any agreement informed of the steps taken to enforce the prohibitions.⁴

Of the twenty-seven nations making statements responding to the initial call for non-intervention in Spain, seventeen were virtually identical, stating the same reasons for adopting such a policy and declaring a willingness to adopt similar measures.⁵ Ten other governments made statements that deviated in some way. The most important of the ten, Germany and Italy, omitted the preamble altogether, and by doing so left themselves

¹“The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War,” [1938], ADM 116/3677, Great Britain, Admiralty, Public Record Office (Kew), London, England.

² Stenographic notes of the first meeting of the Non-Intervention Committee, 9 September, 1936. *Documents On British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*, Second Series, Vol. 17: 233-248. Hereafter referred to as *DBFP* 17. Represented were Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, U.S.S.R., Sweden, Turkey, and Yugoslavia.

³ Norman J. Padelford, “The International Non-Intervention Agreement and the Spanish Civil War,” *The American Journal of International Law* 31, (October 1937): 580. Journal referred to hereafter as *AJIL*.

⁴ *Ibid.* See also, Joel Colton, *Lèon Blum: Humanist in Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 247; and Anthony Eden, *The Eden Memoirs: Facing the Dictators* (London: Cassell, 1962), 451-452.

⁵ *Ibid.* See Also, Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War: Revised and Enlarged Edition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 440-443.

technically free to interfere in ways not specifically forbidden by any agreement – they did not, after all, agree to “abstain from *all* interference.”⁶

Notably absent at the outset, and the reason only twenty-six countries were represented instead of the twenty-seven that responded to the call for non-intervention, was Portugal. Under the leadership of Prime Minister/Dictator Antonio Salazar, the Portuguese government made a highly qualified statement generally supporting the idea of non-intervention, but reserving its options. Understandably, if for no other reason than its geography, the Portuguese government needed some room to maneuver, particularly at the early stages of discussion.⁷ The Lisbon government also supported Franco’s Nationalists, and a large portion of the Italian and German aid entered Spain overland by way of Portuguese ports. The Loyalists lacked the advantage of an openly friendly neighbor, and had to depend on supplies arriving either across the French border, which was only open sporadically, or through Spanish ports, in Spanish or neutral ships, which was a risky proposition.

The first meeting of the International Committee for the Application of the Agreement for Non-Intervention in Spain (hereafter referred to as the Non-Intervention Committee, or NIC) mostly revolved around administrative decisions, such as what language to use when publishing reports, what sort of opening statement to make to the

⁶ Padelford, “The International Non-Intervention Agreement and the Spanish Civil War,” *AJIL* 31: 580. See also, Wm. Laird Kleine-Ahlbrandt, *The Policy of Simmering: A Study of British Policy During the Spanish Civil War* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), 11-12; and Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 453. Italics are mine.

⁷ Padelford, “The International Non-Intervention Agreement and the Spanish Civil War”, *AJIL* 31: 582. See also, Anthony Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 449-450.

press, electing a chairman, and making provisions for gathering information on the laws of the different countries represented that would have a bearing on arms exports to Spain.⁸ On a more substantive level, the delegates discussed the formation of a subcommittee composed of the countries directly bordering on Spain (France and Portugal) and the primary European arms producers (Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union), whose main function would be to “assist the Chairman in settling the work of the Committee.”⁹ The Chairman’s Subcommittee (hereafter referred to as the NIC (CS)) became the *de facto* decision-making body within the NIC, if indeed what the NIC did throughout its lifetime could be called making decisions.

The NIC also spent a good deal of time devising ways to convince the Portuguese government to send a representative.¹⁰ Because the entire Non-Intervention scheme was predicated on the need for goodwill on the part of all participants, it stands to reason that Portugal, with its excellent ports and long land border with Spain, would be perceived as an integral part of any agreement. It took a British reiteration of its “ancient defensive alliance” with Portugal before Lisbon allowed itself to be persuaded to join the NIC.¹¹

The procedure laid down by the Committee at its opening session stated that it would be the duty of the Committee to examine, with a view to ascertaining the

⁸ Stenographic Notes of the first Meeting of the Non-Intervention Committee, *DBFP* 17: 233-248. Mr. W. S. Morrison was the first Chairman of the NIC. He was later replaced by Lord Plymouth.

⁹ Note on the work of the Non-Intervention Committee, *DBFP* 17: 252.

¹⁰ Stenographic Notes of the first Meeting of the Non-Intervention Committee, *DBFP* 17: 233-248.

¹¹ Padelford, “The International Non-Intervention Agreement and the Spanish Civil War”, *AJIL* 31: 582.

facts, any complaints submitted on behalf of a participating government alleging that breaches of the agreement had been committed. It was provided that on receipt of such a complaint the Chairman should request the government to supply “such explanations as are necessary to establish the facts,” and that when these explanations arrived the Committee should “take such steps as may appear proper in each case to establish the facts.”¹²

Once again, and it cannot be emphasized enough, the success of the whole scheme depended absolutely on the willingness of all the participants to abide by the agreement.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the NIC was doomed to ineffectiveness from the start. Of the five major participants - Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union - only Britain had no vested ideological interest in the final outcome of the conflict in Spain. Indeed it was the very fact that the warring sides aroused such strong reaction at the international level that drove the formation of the NIC in the first place.

Factions certainly existed in Britain, and just as vociferous as those elsewhere. On the whole, however, British society was united by a desire for peace or, perhaps more accurately, by a desire to remain uninvolved in someone else’s war. Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, in fragile health, left foreign policy, from formulation to implementation, to the more youthful and energetic Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden. Eden therefore operated largely on his own devices for most of the first year of the war.

¹² Introductory note to chapter IV, *DBFP* 17: 232.

Eden began by unilaterally stopping the arms trade from Britain to Spain, hoping to induce others to do the same. That initial action may have been overly optimistic, but Eden subsequently drove the effort to keep British policy pragmatic.¹³ The United Kingdom's interests were strategic and, to a lesser extent, economic. The overriding objective of British policy was to avoid a general war in Europe, a war for which it was poorly prepared. From a practical standpoint, it made no difference to Britain who won in Spain, provided the victor did not threaten the Empire.¹⁴ For this reason the British were perfectly suited to lead the NIC. The same could not be said of the other major powers.

The French and Soviets, siding with the Spanish Republicans, were no better prepared than England materially or – especially in the case of France – psychologically to go to war over Spain. But ideological motives have to make sense only in their own narrow context to serve as a spur toward conflict. France, with a long land border abutting Spain, with Spanish territory located in such a way as to interdict French access to its colonies in North Africa, and with its own Popular Front government in power, had the most to lose of all the major European powers in the event of a Nationalist victory. Despite that, forces beyond the control of Premier Blum prevented wholehearted support of the Republicans – even the threat of totalitarian dictatorships on all sides did not suffice to quell the fear of communism in some quarters of French society.¹⁵ As a result,

¹³ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 453, 492-493.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 457, 475.

¹⁵ Colton, *Léon Blum*, 238.

French policy took on decidedly chameleon-like characteristics and, while paying lip service to the NIC, opened the land border with Spain to the passage of matériel and volunteers when it was convenient.¹⁶

In the Soviet Union, Josef Stalin also had “opposition” to contend with, for the great purges were just getting underway. Unlike Blum, Stalin had no need for subtlety and pruned his opponents – actual or perceived (mostly the latter) – with all the care of a strip-mining operation. Soviet policy went along with the Non-Intervention concept initially, mainly because Stalin had better things to worry about, but that policy changed quickly when it became apparent that Mussolini and Hitler were actively supporting the Spanish Nationalists with troops and matériel. Because of fractures within the various communist movements, the Popular Front concept took hold in France and Spain independent of Soviet domination, though not without Soviet influence. All the same, Stalin was loathe to see a system fall that could potentially help counter the spread of Fascism and Nazism.¹⁷ In essence, Stalin’s attitude was akin to the notion that “my enemy’s enemy is my friend,” but the level of Soviet aid to the Republic never reached proportions sufficient to cement victory; Stalin was not interested in a general war in Europe.¹⁸ Also, the opportunity to learn something about modern weapons and tactics

¹⁶ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 943 n3. The French-Spanish border was open from July 17 to August 8, 1936; from *circa* October 20, 1937 to January, 1938; from March 16 to June 13, 1938; and from January to February, 1939. It should be noted that these times do not all coincide with the Blum administration. The Chautemps (May, 1937 - March, 1938) and Daladier (April, 1938 onwards) administrations also turned an occasional blind eye to violations of the non-intervention policy.

¹⁷ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 339-340.

¹⁸ David T. Cattell, *Soviet Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1957), 6-7.

was too good to pass up, so, while the Russians sent large quantities of weaponry, they sent few troops, and those mostly technicians, pilots, and observers.¹⁹

The Nationalists received staunch support from Italy and Germany, but for different reasons. In Italy, Mussolini cherished grandiose dreams of military glory and Mediterranean domination. After sixteen years of virtually undisputed leadership, he made the mistake of believing his own propaganda touting the inherent moral and military superiority of Italian Fascism and, searching for a glorious victory for his armed forces, sent massive amounts of aid to Spain.²⁰ Mussolini shipped tanks, planes, artillery, munitions, and division-sized units of troops to aid the Nationalist cause.²¹ Although Franco did not always appreciate the arrogance of the Italian leadership, he nonetheless managed to make use of the equipment and troops.

Hitler showed much more subtlety and focus, his plan being more far-reaching. Hitler's motives for supporting the Nationalists actually had little to do with Spain itself: he kept his eye on the bigger picture, specifically relations between England, France, and Italy, and in the end achieved virtually all of his aims. German efforts had three different but mutually supporting aims: 1) drive a wedge between Italy and the United Kingdom, with the effect of strengthening ties between Germany and Italy; 2) promote discord between the United Kingdom and France with the effect of weakening ties

¹⁹ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 980-982.

²⁰ John F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 75-76. See also, Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976): 99-100.

²¹ *Ibid.* See also, Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 978-979.

between the two main European democracies, which also happened to be Germany's largest potential western opponents to the eastward drive for *lebensraum*; and 3) promote general instability in European diplomatic circles by "keeping the pot boiling," while at the same time providing levels of aid unlikely to spark a general European war.²² Like Stalin, Hitler used the battlefields of Spain as a military laboratory for weapons and tactics for the Luftwaffe and Wehrmacht, but on a grander scale. Germany never sent troops on anything like the scale of the Italians, but several thousand pilots, technicians, tank crew, and observers did gain valuable experience.²³

And so, carrying a cargo of conflicting interests, the Non-Intervention Committee got underway, with its course unsteady and its crew of dubious loyalty. From the very beginning, and throughout the duration of the NIC, discussions centered on three recurring themes: controlling the ingress of arms and munitions into the war zone; granting belligerent's rights to either side; and dealing with the question of foreign volunteers fighting in the two armies. To understand the development of these themes properly, some summary of the war itself is necessary.

By the end of July, 1936, Nationalist forces had consolidated a substantial pocket in the southwest around Cádiz, Sevilla, Córdoba, and Huelva, including the Straits of Gibraltar, and controlled most of northwestern Spain from Galicia to the Pyrenees, with the exception of most of the Biscay coast (see Map 2).²⁴ In August, Franco launched thrusts from his southern foothold to the north toward Badajóz and to the east to relieve a

²² Robert H. Whealey, *Hitler and Spain* (Lexington KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 11-12, 42-43. See also, Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 356, 942.

²³ *Ibid.* See also, Whealey, *Hitler and Spain*, 9.

pocket of rebellion in Granada, while in the north, rebel forces drove on Oviedo to relieve another pocket in that city. After securing the entire Portuguese border, Franco directed his forces northeast toward Toledo and Madrid, in a bid to occupy the capital and end the war quickly.²⁵ At the same time General Mola, commander of the northern rebel forces, launched a drive on San Sebastián and Irún in a successful bid to cut off Loyalist forces along the Biscay coast from the French border (see Maps 3 & 4).

Toledo fell on September 28, opening the way for the final push on Madrid.²⁶ The Nationalists jumped off on October 7, resuming their offensive in an effort to cover the last fifty miles to Madrid. By early November, 1936, the battle reached the capital itself. In a desperate defensive effort, with vicious house-to-house fighting lasting into the third week of the month, Republican forces first blunted the Nationalist thrust, then turned it back. By early December the opposing sides found themselves stalemated. Nearly five months of incessant combat had temporarily exhausted both armies. The Nationalists had underestimated the depth of their opposition, and Franco's attempt – perhaps his only hope – to end the war quickly had failed. As 1937 approached it became clear that the war would be a long, drawn-out, ugly affair. Madrid would not finally capitulate until the end of March, 1939.

Something else became abundantly clear as well: neither side could have survived so long without substantial outside help. By the end of the initial campaign, Germany and Italy had, between them, supplied the Spanish Nationalists with over 280

²⁴ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 256.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 402.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 423.

aircraft; 95 tanks; 270 mortars, artillery pieces, and anti-tank guns; 402 machine guns; 110,000 hand grenades; and over 53 million rounds of small-arms ammunition.²⁷ Most of these supplies arrived via Portugal.²⁸ German and Italian aircraft airlifted between 12,000 and 23,000 troops from Morocco to the Iberian Peninsula.²⁹ Italian naval units escorted merchant vessels carrying supplies to Spain, and Italian submarines began operating on behalf of the Nationalists.³⁰ In October, 1936, the first Italian ground forces entered combat, with a unit of armored cars and anti-tank guns numbering about 300 men, which was active during the drive on Madrid.³¹ Mussolini's first contribution to the ground war presaged an involvement that eventually numbered nearly eighty thousand men.

On the Republican side, supplies from the Soviet Union proved to be a key factor in halting the rebel offensive. Artillery, tanks, small arms, and ammunition, in substantial quantities, arrived from the USSR, in Spanish and Soviet ships from ports in the Crimea, just in time to equip the Madrid defenders, as did aircraft which allowed the loyalists at least parity in the air over the capital at the crucial time.³² The famed "International Brigades", composed of volunteers from other countries, also saw their first combat on the Republican side during the first battle for Madrid.³³ Some French aid reached the Republic during this time as well, but it was the Soviet aid that tipped the

²⁷ Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 115.

²⁸ Whealey, *Hitler and Spain*, 44.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 101. See also, Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 108.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 116 - 117.

³¹ Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 109-110.

³² Cattell, *Soviet Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War*, 40.

³³ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 479-481.

scales against the Nationalists at a vital juncture and allowed the Republic to continue the fight.

Inevitably, the fact that four of the major powers involved in the NIC were also closely tied to one side or the other in the conflict caused serious problems for non-intervention. Diplomacy by committee is seldom effective, and especially so when the participants work at cross-purposes. The NIC was no exception. As noted previously, the three main topics discussed at the NIC meetings were the granting of belligerent status (referred to at the time as “belligerent’s rights”), foreign volunteers, and the export of arms to Spain by NIC members. Of the three, belligerent status was by far the most complicated and calls for some explanation.

Granting of belligerent status means simply that third parties recognize the fact that a war is being fought. Conversely, withholding of belligerent’s rights means that, legally, a state of war does not exist. The ramifications of that concept are anything but simple.

Without recognition of the belligerency of the insurgents, the searches and seizures of merchantmen by loyalist men-of-war on the high seas are contrary to law. Even more strictly limited are the commissioned vessels of the rebel government: the legality of their visitations not only is unrecognized on the high seas but also is questioned when committed within the territorial waters controlled by their forces. Premature recognition may be looked upon by the parent state as a gratuitous demonstration of sympathy which in certain cases may amount to an unfriendly act. Recognition given too early in civil struggles may

be tantamount to intervention and lead to international friction. . . .[T]hird Powers have refused . . . to accord the Spanish rebels the status of belligerents. By the same token, of course, the established Spanish Government is denied the rights of war. . . .The war is not a war in the technical sense, because third Powers have felt constrained to withhold recognition of belligerency.³⁴

By withholding recognition of belligerent status, the major powers could then keep a much closer eye on the conflict because, under international law, vessels from either side were prohibited from interfering with shipping outside of territorial waters. More important, withholding belligerent's rights made the goal of keeping the war localized much more realistic.³⁵ While common sense may have dictated that, when tens of thousands of men were killing and maiming one another, a war did indeed exist, expediency dictated a more cautious approach to the problem lest the conflict spill over into the rest of Europe. Both Republicans and Nationalists clamored for recognition of belligerent status throughout the conflict but neither received it. Germany and Italy recognized the Nationalists as the legitimate government of Spain on November 18, but never officially extended belligerent status; to do so would have implied the same for the Republicans.³⁶ While Britain only officially recognized the Nationalists as the government of Spain in February of 1939, on November 7, 1936, Eden authorized the

³⁴ Vernon A. O'Rourke, "Recognition of Belligerency and the Spanish Civil War", *AJIL* 31 (July, 1937): 398-399.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 410-411.

³⁶ Record by Sir R. Vansittart of a conversation with German Ambassador, November 18, 1936. *DBFP* 17: 562. See also, Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 567, and Whealey, *Hitler and Spain*, 51. Recognition of legitimacy should not be equated with recognition of belligerency.

British ambassador to Madrid to “establish *de facto* contacts with General Franco’s administration as are practically necessary for the protection of British interests”³⁷

The issue of volunteers fighting for one side or the other, a conceptually simpler matter than that of belligerent’s rights, as a practical matter was actually much more complicated. While recognition of belligerency had the greater potential to widen the war, it was nonetheless a political question dealt with in the abstract. Foreign volunteers, on the other hand, were actually in combat on both sides virtually from the beginning, and the subject of their withdrawal occupied a great amount of time and energy. The volunteers generally fell into two categories, those of conscience and those who were part of units sent to fight by their government. The Nationalists benefited from the second category almost exclusively. At its peak the Italian CTV (*Corpo Truppe Volontarie*) numbered 44,648 men, consisting of fascist paramilitary “blackshirts” and units of the regular Italian army.³⁸ The German *Legión Condor* counted on a strength of about 5,600 men, a number that remained fairly static throughout the conflict.³⁹ A relatively small number of Red Army officers and men participated on the Republican side, and their effect was far out of proportion to their numbers. The importance of the Soviet advisors only grew larger as communists gained progressively more control of the Republican government.

³⁷ Eden to Ogilvie-Forbes (Madrid), November 7, 1936. *DBFP* 17: 523.

³⁸ Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 396. The total number of Italians that cycled through Spain was about 80,000 men -- 74,300 army and militia and 5,700 airforce.

³⁹ Whealey, *Hitler and Spain*, 102. The Germans cycled a total of about 20,000 men through Spain, mostly in technical fields such as aviation, armor, artillery, and communications. Few Germans actually exposed themselves to combat on the ground.

Some volunteers of conscience served with the Nationalists, but their number and variety did not compare to those serving the Republic. The level of training of these idealistic amateurs fighting for both sides ranged from questionable to nonexistent, although early on they partially made up for it with enthusiasm – a fact that led to a very high casualty rate. In any event, both sides were unwilling to give up their volunteers, both sides clamored to the NIC to find a way to force the other to give up its volunteers, and the NIC was incapable of resolving the problem.⁴⁰

The primary purpose of the NIC, however, was to prevent arms shipments to either side. Giving itself the tools needed to pursue the non-intervention policy, the British Parliament passed the Carriage of Munitions to Spain Act on December 3, 1936, prohibiting the shipment of arms to Spain in British hulls.⁴¹ The new act committed Britain to the enforcement of an arms embargo and, if not really effective in that regard, at least had some effect.

The first concrete proposal for some sort of agreement to control the export of arms to Spain came from the NIC (CS) on November 2, 1936.⁴² The original idea revolved around keeping neutral observers at all border crossings and ports in Spain, who would inspect inbound cargoes for contraband. The main flaw in this idea was obvious: cooperation from both sides in the civil war would be needed to make the plan work, and

⁴⁰ Foreign Office to Phipps (Berlin), *DBFP* 17: 723.

⁴¹ “The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War”, ADM 116/3677, PRO. See also, Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 466 - 467.

⁴² “Conclusions of the eighth meeting of the Chairman’s Sub-Committee of the N.I. Committee held in the Foreign Office on Monday, November 2, 1936, at 3.30 p.m.,” *DBFP* 17: 493.

cooperation was forthcoming from neither. Moreover, the Germans, Italians, and Soviets continued to pour supplies into the area while the French allowed large numbers of volunteers across the border into the Republic, and those facts certainly kept the NIC from being credible. For the whole scheme to work, the differences between the main participants had to be ironed out – which was much easier said than done.

Relations between the five major powers in Europe were very convoluted, and all of the details would take up volumes. For the purposes of this work only those subjects that most affected Britain will be outlined here.

Besides being involved in the NIC, in November, 1936, Britain was in the process of negotiating what became known as the “Gentleman’s Agreement” with Italy. The purpose of the Gentleman’s Agreement was to settle the differences between the two countries arising from the Italian conquest of Abyssinia, and come to some sort of arrangement for peaceful coexistence in the Mediterranean.

Britain perceived Italy to be its main potential enemy at the time. Dating back to Mussolini’s Ethiopian venture, and even earlier, a basic conflict of interests between the two nations was glaringly apparent and centered on domination of the Mediterranean basin.⁴³ Essentially, the United Kingdom had it, and Mussolini wanted it. For years, Mussolini’s propaganda machine boosted Italian prowess and the return to the “glory that was Rome”, after 1936 pointing to the subjugation of Ethiopia as proof that Italy was indeed resurging.⁴⁴ It made no difference that an undeveloped nation with minimal military capabilities had resisted the “might” of the Italian war machine for the better part

of six months – Mussolini controlled the Italian press with an iron fist and allowed only stories of glorious victory to appear before his citizens. Britain, meanwhile, had led the charge for League of Nations sanctions on Italy, and Mussolini never forgave the British for having the audacity to try to prevent him from expanding an Italian empire in Africa, a feeling which led in turn to closer ties between Italy and Germany. Mussolini and Hitler consummated their diplomatic relationship on October 23, 1936, with a protocol that recognized each others' respective spheres of influence, a protocol that became known as the "Axis Pact," and gave the subsequent alliance between the two dictators the "Axis" sobriquet.⁴⁵ The Axis Pact acknowledged Eastern Europe as lying in Germany's sphere and the Mediterranean Sea as lying in Italy's. It also opened Austria up to eventual German occupation, Italy having been the main stumbling block against Hitler's 1934 ambitions toward his southern neighbor.

In the meantime, Britain, which should have been making common cause with France in opposition to the Axis, went its own way in the diplomatic arena. While the French made arrangements with Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union to defend against possible German and Italian aggression, the British persisted in their desire to be the "balance of power" in Europe and refused to give up their independence of action to commit to any kind of alliance, not that any alliance would have done much good, without the will to stand firm and the force to back it up. To make matters worse, the distractions caused by the proposed marriage between King Edward VIII and American

⁴³ Kleine-Ahlbrandt, *The Policy of Simmering*, 37.

⁴⁴ Mack-Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, 75 - 77.

divorcee Wallis Simpson had the minds of most Britons – particularly those of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, and of Parliament – occupied elsewhere besides foreign affairs. In the face of various crises, both ongoing and potential, Foreign Secretary Eden labored to achieve some kind of workable solution to the situations in Spain and the Mediterranean *vis-à-vis* the Axis dictators.

Against this backdrop, Britain negotiated the Gentleman's Agreement with Italy, signed by the two nations on January 2, 1937. In the agreement, the signatories pledged to

Recognise that the freedom of entry into, exit from, and transit through, the Mediterranean is a vital interest to the different parts of the British Empire and to Italy, and that these interests are in no way inconsistent with each other;

Disclaim any desire to modify or, so far as they are concerned, to see modified the status quo as regards national sovereignty of territories in the Mediterranean area;

Undertake to respect each other's rights and interests in the said area;

Agree to use their best endeavours to discourage any activities liable to impair the good relations which it is the object of the present declaration to consolidate.⁴⁶

At the same time, an exchange of notes took place which specified the status of Spanish territory, stating that

⁴⁵ Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 110-113. The term "Axis" first surfaced in a speech given in Milan by Mussolini on November 1, 1936. See also, Whealey, *Hitler and Spain*, 155.

⁴⁶ Texts of an Anglo-Italian declaration with regard to the Mediterranean signed at Rome on January 2, 1937, and of an Exchange of Notes regarding the status quo in the Western Mediterranean published on the same date, *DBFP* 17: 754.

[T]he Italian Government had not, either before or since the revolution in Spain, engaged in any negotiations with General Franco whereby the status quo in the Western Mediterranean would be altered, nor would they engage in any such negotiations in the future.⁴⁷

If Mussolini's good intentions had been in doubt before signing the Gentleman's Agreement, he confirmed the doubts as well founded immediately by sending a further contingent of about 4,000 Italian troops to Spain right before the agreement was signed.⁴⁸ While the Italian dictator's action did not directly contravene the letter of the agreement made with England, it certainly went against the spirit. To Eden, Mussolini "taught . . . a lesson, that there was no value in negotiating with Mussolini again, unless he first carried out the engagements he had already entered into."⁴⁹ Slowly but surely, Eden was learning that the rules of international conduct, in the eyes of the Axis dictators – Mussolini in particular – were no longer based on honoring agreements beyond that which was convenient.⁵⁰

From its inception, the NIC was flooded with charges of violations of the non-intervention policy from all sides. One of the odd characteristics of the NIC was that it contained no Spanish representatives from either side. In general, the Germans, Italians, and Portuguese filed complaints on behalf of the Nationalists, and France, the USSR, and Britain filed on behalf of the Republicans.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 486-487.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 487.

⁵⁰ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 487.

The rules adopted by the NIC tended to discourage the presentation of complaints. Any complaint had to come from a government represented in the committee, which eliminated direct participation by any Spaniards, either Republican or Nationalist, private individuals, news people, or governments not represented in the NIC. The NIC only reviewed the evidence presented, and had no mechanism to apply any sanctions to violators, nor any provision for legal appeals to any other body, such as the League of Nations.⁵¹ The ceaseless bickering about who violated what achieved exactly nothing, and by the end of November, 1936, the NIC turned its attention to other matters besides specific violations of the agreement, and concentrated on interrupting the flow of arms.⁵² As noted above, the first proposal, on November 2, was stillborn because of the need for agreement by the hostile parties in Spain. It provided the germ of an idea, however, and the NIC (CS) developed the original into something much more intricate but which, it was hoped, had at least a chance of working.

The NIC (CS) had to clear three major hurdles in formulating some sort of plan to enforce the original Non-Intervention Agreement, which after all dealt only with the export of munitions and matériel, not troops.⁵³ The appearance of the International Brigades in the defense of Madrid gave Mussolini the excuse he needed to further expand Italy's role in Spain. To that end he signed a secret treaty with Franco on November 28.⁵⁴ Complicating matters further, a significant portion of the foreign volunteers fighting for the Republic entered through France, a fact that the Axis were quick to point

⁵¹ Padelford, "The International Non-Intervention Agreement and the Spanish Civil War", *AJIL* 31: 587.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 588-589.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 583.

out. At German suggestion, the NIC formed a technical subcommittee to take on the volunteer, or “prohibition” issue, and also financial matters.⁵⁵ This left the Chairman’s Subcommittee to deal primarily with the arms, or “control” issue and handle general oversight. The subdivision of effort only gave the Axis further opportunity to delay.

Aside from the unwillingness of either side in the war to cut off their own means of pursuing the fight, neither the Germans or Italians were very interested in backing out, and the Soviets, not unreasonably, would not be bound by any agreement any more than any other government. Seeing the possibilities of an escalation of conflict in general, and beginning to worry about Germany in particular, Eden wrote in a memorandum that

The Spanish civil war has ceased to be an internal Spanish issue and has become an international battle-ground. . . . [U]nless we cry a halt in Spain, we shall have trouble this year in one or other of the danger points. It is to be remembered that in the language of the Nazi Party any adventure is a minor adventure. They spoke thus of the Rhineland last year, they are speaking thus of Spain today, they will speak thus of Memel, Danzig or Czechoslovakia tomorrow.⁵⁶

The British then approached the Axis governments directly, bypassing the NIC, to make known their extreme concern on the subjects of volunteers and arms shipments. In messages to the English ambassadors to both Germany and Italy, the Foreign Office charged those gentlemen with making the British position known directly to the dictators and, if possible, securing a commitment from them to stop the dispatch of “volunteers”

⁵⁴ Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 153.

⁵⁵ Kleine-Ahlbrandt, *The Policy of Simmering*, 110.

⁵⁶ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 488-489.

concurrent to an agreement to cease delivery of arms.⁵⁷ The same message was delivered to the French, Portuguese, and Soviets as well. As a gesture of good faith, effective January 10, Eden committed to enforcing the Foreign Enlistment Act which forbade British citizens from enlisting in any foreign armed service.⁵⁸ Together with the Carriage of Munitions Act, the British government had the legislation in place to address the main concerns of the NIC.

The Axis leaders delayed their response for several days in order to consult with one another and decide on a unified response.⁵⁹ Italy equivocated, pointing accusing fingers at the French and Soviets, and faulted the British for acquiescing to a negative press campaign, “the subscription of money and in the enrollment of volunteers” that “already constitute a violent and dangerous form of intervention.”⁶⁰ The British ambassador in Berlin, Sir Eric Phipps, reported that Hitler was

... in a very irritable and undecided frame of mind regarding reply to our Spanish note ... Herr von Ribbentrop means to counsel moderation but the Führer has already pointed out to him that Russian and French reds have had free access to Spain from the start and now that General Franco’s sympathisers are showing signs of activity it is proposed to close the door.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Foreign Office to Sir E. Phipps (Berlin) December 24, 1937, *DBFP* 17: 723 - 724. Identical notes went to Sir E. Drummond (Rome), Sir C. Wingfield (Lisbon), and Viscount Chilton (Moscow). *Ibid.*, 723, n. 1.

⁵⁸ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 490.

⁵⁹ Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 171 - 172. See also, Kleine-Ahlbrandt, *The Policy of Simmering*, 44 - 45.

⁶⁰ Sir E. Drummond (Rome) to Mr. Eden, January 7, 1937. Great Britain. Foreign Office. *Documents on British Foreign Policy* Second Series, Vol. 18 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1980): 25 - 28. Publication referred to hereafter as *DBFP* 18.

⁶¹ Sir E. Phipps (Berlin) to Mr. Eden, *DBFP* 18: 17.

On January 11 the British ambassador to Italy, Sir Eric Drummond, reiterated his government's position to the Italian Foreign Minister, Count Ciano, personally. Ciano replied evasively, denying any intention of sending more troops but not committing Italy to anything concrete prior to a control agreement.⁶² In typical Mussolini fashion, the first of a further 9,000 Italian troops began sailing for Spain the same day, and the flow of military supplies continued unabated.⁶³

Meanwhile, the NIC (CS) continued to develop a control plan for Spain, and it began to take on something resembling its final form. Where the initial proposals included observers within Spanish territory, the new plan called for a system of observers at border crossings outside of Spain, observers in certain designated ports, and a naval patrol along the Spanish coast to act as enforcer.

As usual, the devil was in the details. Who would provide the observers? Where would they be located? How would the naval component be structured? Where would the money come from to pay for it all? On top of that, the Portuguese refused to go along, claiming diminished sovereignty if they allowed foreign troops to operate on their territory.⁶⁴ The Axis leaders insisted that an air component be included, a demand that was, due to the nature of aerial travel of the day, entirely unrealistic, but which enabled further delays. Delay helped the Axis, because Mussolini and Hitler intended to ship as much as possible before any agreement could be reached.⁶⁵

⁶² Kleine-Ahlbrandt, *The Policy of Simmering*, 45.

⁶³ Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 173 - 174.

⁶⁴ Padelford, "The International Non-Intervention Agreement and the Spanish Civil War", *AJIL* 31: 589.

⁶⁵ Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 202. A scheme to cover supplies being flown in was unworkable because the aircraft of the day routinely operated from rough fields. There were only

On January 25, 1937, in a sudden turnabout, Mussolini decided that he would be willing to cease sending arms and troops to Spain if others did the same.⁶⁶ In reality, both he and Hitler had sent – or were about to send – everything that they intended, and now wanted to close the door to the Republicans.⁶⁷

With Italy and Germany now motivated to arrive at a control agreement with minimum delay, the NIC took on an illusion of efficiency, and actually made some progress. After the usual negotiations and diplomatic jousting typical of the NIC's activities, an extremely detailed control arrangement finally emerged. A resolution passed on February 16, 1937, covered the "recruitment in, the transit through, or the departure from, their respective countries of persons of non-Spanish nationality proposing to proceed to Spain, Spanish possessions or the Spanish zone of Morocco for the purpose of taking part in the present conflict," as well as enforcing the arms embargo.⁶⁸

The NIC established the International Board for Non-Intervention in Spain, with administrative authority over the observation scheme, but with the duty "to submit all matters raising questions of principle" to the NIC for action, and authorized a three-pronged strategy to fulfill the mission.⁶⁹ The first part of the plan set up a system of observers to cover the land border crossings into Spain from France and Gibraltar, with

so many ports usable by ocean-going vessels, but a nearly unlimited number of fields usable by the aircraft of the time.

⁶⁶ Ingram (Rome) to Foreign Office, *DBFP* 18, 150 - 152.

⁶⁷ Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 203.

⁶⁸ "Resolution Relating to the Scheme of Observation of the Spanish Frontiers by Land and Sea", *AJIL* 31: Official Documents, 163. Document hereafter referred to as "Control Agreement".

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

the right to search for illegal shipments of goods and examine the passports of those crossing into Spain – a separate agreement had to be reached between Great Britain and Portugal that committed the British to being the only foreign presence on Portuguese soil, but which otherwise complied with the NIC’s resolution.⁷⁰

The second part of the plan established a system of observers stationed at a number of ports outside of Spain, designated as “Observation Ports”, and included The Downs (or Dover), Cherbourg, Marseilles, Gibraltar, Lisbon, Madeira, and Palermo. Any merchant vessel flying the flag of a signatory nation was required to stop at one of the Observation Ports to take an observer aboard, whereupon the ship could proceed to Spain while the observer determined whether or not that vessel’s cargo complied with the agreement.⁷¹

The third and most complicated part of the plan divided the Spanish coastline into eight patrol zones to be allotted to Britain, France, Italy, and Germany (See Map 6). Naval vessels involved in the patrol were charged with immediately reporting violators to the NIC – a violator being defined as a vessel which had “not been notified as having submitted to observation” – and with submitting “periodical reports to the [NIC], giving full particulars regarding the arrival of all ships entering Spanish ports.”⁷² In theory, a merchantman bound for Spain was supposed to stop at one of the Observation Ports to pick up an observer, report its intentions to the naval patrol in the area where the

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 168 - 169.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 174.

cargo was to be discharged, make contact with the patrol near the point of entry to confirm the presence of the observing officer, then enter port to unload. The patrolling ships had the authority to board an inbound merchant vessel, but only to ascertain if an observer was aboard. If not, the warship “could do no more than draw the attention of the Master to this irregularity and make reports” to be forwarded to the NIC, whereupon “severe penalties will be imposed by the participating Governments on the masters of ships . . . if there are no Observing Officers aboard”⁷³. The flaws in this system were obvious. It had no teeth, and depended entirely on the good will of the participants to succeed, but despite that actually worked reasonably well during the short life of the patrol.

The NIC adopted the Control Agreement in its final form on March 8, 1937, to come into force forthwith. The land observation scheme, being simpler to implement, went into operation immediately. The naval patrol took more time to assemble, and the NIC intended it to take up station by March 13; in the event, it did not actually begin operations until April 19.

As noted earlier, the Axis eased up on their obstructionist tendencies and actually allowed the NIC to get some useful work done because both Hitler and Mussolini had essentially finished sending arms to the Nationalists by the end of January, 1937, and had no intention of further expanding their presence in the conflict. Hitler lived up to that intention and kept Germany’s material involvement fairly constant until the end of the war. Mussolini, however, presented an altogether different problem because he allowed

⁷³ “The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War”, ADM 116/3677. PRO. Also, “Control Agreement”, *AJIL*

national pride to interfere with his plans. In the middle of March, the Nationalists initiated a new campaign to occupy Madrid, this time by driving on the city from the northeast, at Guadalajara, instead of the southwest. Mussolini insisted that Italian troops should have a major role in the campaign, in order to be able to claim a victory for his armed forces and reap all of the ensuing propaganda advantages.⁷⁴

The Nationalist advance began on March 8, with the Italians in the van of the attacking force, and showed good progress until the 14th, pushing the Republican defenders back some twenty-five miles. A three day pause in the action followed, while the Italians tried to consolidate their gains. On the 18th, Republican forces counterattacked, and in the space of one day routed the Italian force and recovered more than half of the territory lost the previous week.⁷⁵ Italian losses were heavy, but most important was the fact that Mussolini's pride was injured, and Italy sorely embarrassed.⁷⁶ Any intention to stabilize Italy's contributions to the rebellion went out the window, and Mussolini reinforced his determination to see the Nationalists win the war. Now it was not simply the victory of Fascism that was at stake, but national pride as well. The battle of Guadalajara, not decisive in itself, subtly changed the tenor of international involvement in the Spanish Civil War.

31, "Official Documents", 175.

⁷⁴ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 596 - 602.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 218. See also, Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, 101 - 102.

Also in March, Franco launched an offensive in northern Spain against the Basques, the opening move in the Biscay campaign to reduce the Republicans along the Biscay coast (See Map 5). The Loyalists had been isolated from the French border since the previous September and had a large portion of Spain between them and the main part of Republican Spain. With no supplies arriving by land, the Biscay defenders had to rely on seaborne shipments for essentials. Franco declared a blockade of the Biscay coast, primarily focused on the three main ports of Gijón, Santander, and Bilbao. The Nationalist fleet based at Ferrol, in the northwest corner of the Iberian peninsula, consisting of the old battleship *España*, the light cruiser *Almirante Cervera*, and a few smaller ships, began patrolling aggressively, intent on interdicting the Loyalists' supply lines, and laid mines outside of the main ports.⁷⁷ For Franco, eliminating the Republicans along the north coast allowed him to concentrate his efforts against the main portion of the Loyalist territory in the south instead of splitting his forces along two fronts, and also gave the Nationalists control of the substantial industrial and mining areas around Bilbao.

The Biscay campaign dragged on through November, 1937, and its beginning coincided with the implementation of the NIC's control agreement. With the advent of the agreement, the diplomats could stand back to observe results and judge the effectiveness of the patrol, meaning that, for Great Britain, the Royal Navy was at the leading edge of British foreign policy once again.

According to the control agreement the Royal Navy was assigned two long

sections of the Spanish coast for patrol duty, from the Portuguese border east around the straits of Gibraltar to Cape Gata in the south, and from the French border west to Cape Busto in the north (See Map 6). The agreement proved to be a double-edged sword: on the one hand it gave the Royal Navy a defined mission to fulfill, while on the other hand, it made the possibility of direct confrontation more real while requiring a greater commitment of assets already spread thin.⁷⁸

The Royal Navy had not been idle in months between the forming of the NIC in September and the control agreement in March. Between evacuating civilians from the war zone, performing other humanitarian functions such as keeping foreign legations in Madrid supplied, and patrolling the Spanish coast to protect British merchant shipping, the navy kept a substantial part of its fleet in constant service.

The discharge of . . . numerous and varied duties obviously required the constant employment of a considerable number of warships in Spanish waters. The early months of 1937, however, saw a further increase of naval commitments. The large extent of the patrol areas necessitated the keeping of a number of ships constantly at sea; and it must be remembered that work of this type involves the employment of many more vessels than are actually engaged on patrol at any given time. Constant replacements are necessary and other vital work cannot altogether be neglected. For every ship at sea there must be others resting, repairing, or refueling.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 618-619

⁷⁸“The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War,” ADM 116/3677. PRO.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

The potential for tension between the Nationalist fleet and units of the Royal Navy escalated with the blockade. The Royal Navy's mission was twofold: to enforce the control agreement, and to protect British shipping outside of Spanish territorial waters. While the control agreement did not officially go into effect until April 20th, the respective navies took up station along the assigned stretches of coast in March. Confrontation did not take long.

A typical situation arose on the morning of April 6th. The British merchantman *Thorpehall*, inbound to Bilbao with foodstuffs aboard, reported by wireless that she had been fired upon by an armed trawler while still eight miles from the coast. The British destroyer H.M.S. *Brazen*, patrolling nearby, proceeded to investigate. As she approached the scene, her crew at action stations, the Nationalist cruiser *Almirante Cervera* also arrived in the area to support her consort. *Brazen*'s captain, Cdr. R. M. T. Taylor, placed his ship between *Thorpehall* and the Spanish cruiser while protesting that the merchantman had been interfered with outside of the recognized three-mile limit. *Almirante Cervera* backed off to wait near the territorial limit and capture *Thorpehall* when she tried to enter Bilbao. Later in the morning, *Brazen* was joined by two of her squadron mates, destroyers H.M.S. *Blanche* and H.M.S. *Beagle*, whereupon the three British ships formed line ahead, placed themselves between *Thorpehall* and *Almirante Cervera* with crews at action stations, and shepherded the merchant vessel to Bilbao.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

The Non-Intervention patrol officially began operations on April 20th. The British increased the Royal Navy's presence along both of its areas of responsibility, having learned from the *Thorpehall* incident that a credible deterrent was needed if a shooting confrontation with Nationalist fleet units was to be avoided altogether rather than simply postponed. The Royal Navy stationed a squadron of capital ships in each patrol area in the belief that superior firepower would deter the Spaniards from taking any rash action. Confrontation was unavoidable, but perhaps shooting at one another was not, and the

Spanish wasted no time in testing British resolve.

On April 23rd, three British merchant vessels, the *Macgregor*, *Hamsterley*, and *Stanbrook*, showed up together off Bilbao after having been warned of the risks involved. Two Royal Navy ships, the destroyer H.M.S. *Fearless* and the battlecruiser H.M.S. *Hood*, were on station nearby. Two Spanish ships, the armed trawler *Galerna* and the cruiser *Almirante Cervera*, fired warning shots toward the merchantmen while the ships were outside the territorial limit. When Admiral J.F. Blake, aboard *Hood*, protested the Spaniard's actions, the *Cervera*'s commander replied, claiming a six mile territorial limit. Admiral Blake was having none of that, and stationed *Fearless* at the three mile limit as an indicator to the Spanish of where they could conduct their blockade. Faced with overwhelming force on the one hand and the possibility of mine fields and shore

batteries on the other, the Spaniards backed down and eventually allowed the three merchant ships through under the watchful eyes of the British squadron.⁸¹

Duty along the Spanish coast was not all alarms and excursions. Several incidents during April and May underscored the hazards of patrolling in the midst of someone else's war. On April 29th, the Spanish battleship *España* struck a mine while enforcing the blockade outside of Santander and sank with heavy casualties.⁸² Witnesses reported that the battleship was attempting to keep the British merchant vessel *Knitsley* from entering port when she was wracked by an explosion. Rescue efforts by the Nationalist destroyer *Velasco* and the cruiser *Almirante Cervera* were hampered by attacks from Republican aircraft stationed at Santander which scored no hits. The sinking of *España* confirmed the presence of mines in the area, reports of which had previously been treated with skepticism.⁸³ While no British warships were involved, the now undeniable fact that there were mines present only added to the tension of day-to-day operations. On the same day, the British government agreed to give protection to ships removing refugees from Bilbao, over the objections of General Franco.⁸⁴

On the other side of Spain British naval vessels saw duty that was no less hazardous, even if it was generally less eventful due to the absence of a declared Nationalist blockade. Nonetheless, rebel mining of Republican ports and Republican air force activity made non-intervention patrol inherently dangerous. On May 13th the

⁸¹ *Ibid.* See also, Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars*, 2: 380.

⁸² Roskill, *Naval Policy*, 2: 381. See also, "The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War," ADM 116/3677, PRO, and *Times* (London), May 1, 1937: 16.

⁸³ "The Blockade of Bilbao", *The New Statesman and Nation* 13 (January - June, 1937): 1029-1031.

⁸⁴ *The Times* (London), May 1, 1937: 16.

destroyer H.M.S. *Hunter* hit a mine while on patrol off the Republican port of Almería, leaving eight dead and fourteen injured.⁸⁵ The British government, assuming that the mine was laid by the Nationalists, made a claim to the Nationalists for damages in the amount of £127,054; it was never paid.⁸⁶ It was almost miraculous that the Royal Navy had conducted such extensive operations off the coast of Spain for some ten months without any casualties before the *Hunter* incident, but in the conditions prevailing at the time an event resulting in British casualties was virtually inevitable.

Another incident involved the Italian cruiser *Barletta*, bombed by Republican aircraft while in port at Palma de Mallorca in the Balearics on May 24th.⁸⁷ The attack killed six Italians, and was “vigorously protested” to the NIC.⁸⁸ On the 25th, Republican aircraft dropped bombs near the British destroyer H.M.S. *Hardy*, and on the 26th repeated the effort against the German destroyer *Albatross*.⁸⁹ More protests to the NIC followed from all of the participants in the patrol, primarily focused on the lack of provisions in the control agreement regarding the members’ rights of self-defense.⁹⁰

In all, the non-intervention patrol had a salutary effect on the shipments of arms into Spain, although that was probably due to the fact that the Axis were willing to go along with it for a while. In February, when the agreement was first reached, Mussolini was anxious for a quick end to the war, and Hitler had built his forces in the area up to

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, May 14, 1937: 14. Casualties listed in *Ibid.*, May 15, 1937: 12. See also, Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars*, 382.

⁸⁶ Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars*, 382.

⁸⁷ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 683. See also, Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 303.

⁸⁸ Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 303.

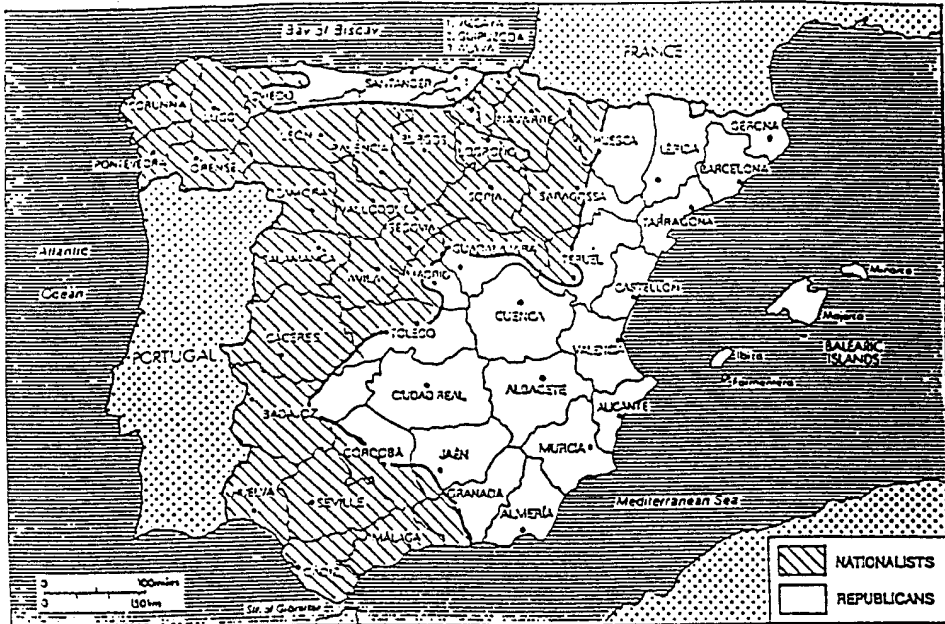
⁸⁹ *The Times* (London), May 31, 1937: 13. See also, Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 682.

⁹⁰ *The Times* (London), May 31, 1937, 13.

the desired level. The battle of Guadalajara changed Mussolini's attitude, but he had already entered into the control agreement and could not immediately back out gracefully. Hitler's attitude was about to change with the *Deutschland* incident described in the next chapter.

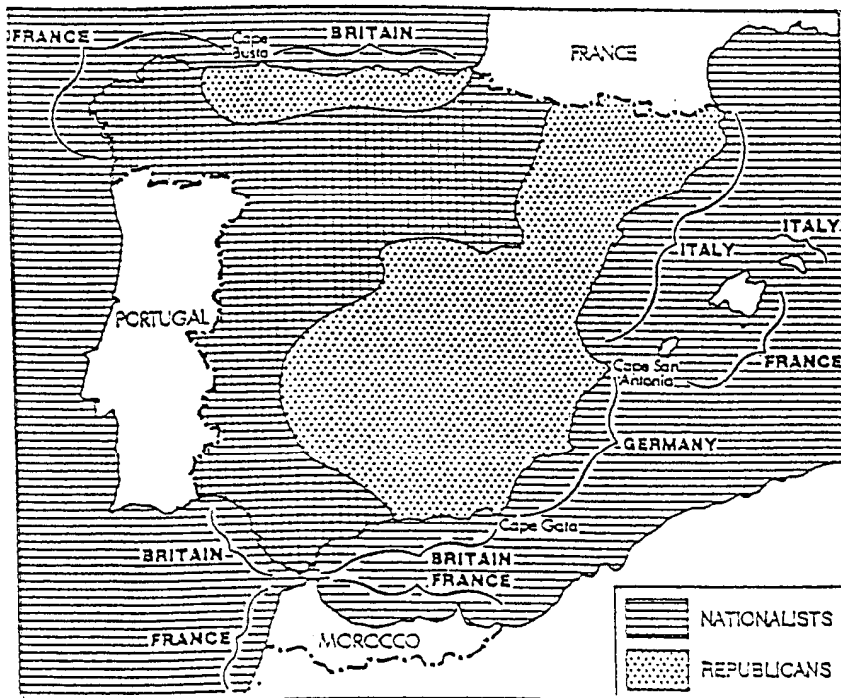
British foreign policy was about to undergo major changes with the exit of Stanley Baldwin from the Prime Ministry and the succession of Neville Chamberlain. After the abdication of Edward VIII, Baldwin decided that he would retire from public service upon the coronation of George VI, and tapped Chamberlain to be his successor. Anthony Eden remained at the head of the Foreign Office, not suspecting that the relationship between him and Chamberlain was fated to be less than cordial. The main victim of the changes, in the short run, was the non-intervention patrol.

Map 5: The division of Spain, March, 1937.



Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, Revised and Enlarged Edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 610, map 23.

Map 6: The Naval Non-Intervention Patrol.



Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 634, map 25.

CHAPTER 5

STUMBLING RIGHT ALONG . . .

MAY 29 - SEPTEMBER 14, 1937

Anthony Eden assessed his relationship with Neville Chamberlain prior to June, 1937, as being “closer to each other than to any other member of the Government, exchanging opinions on many cabinet matters without disagreement.”¹ After Stanley Baldwin’s hands-off approach to foreign affairs, Eden “looked forward to working with a Prime Minister who would give his Foreign Secretary energetic backing.”² Chamberlain was “efficient, conscientious, and unimaginative,” a solid manager with excellent credentials in home affairs.³

The essential difference between Chamberlain and Baldwin lay in their managerial styles. Where Baldwin chose to delegate authority and then stand back in a supervisory role, Chamberlain tended to micromanage. Because attention to detail often spells the difference between success and failure, a micromanaging style does not have to be a negative trait in a leader. But when it occurs in a situation where the leader has no background in, or intuitive understanding of, the details, micromanagement is more likely to lead to failure than to success. While Chamberlain’s background made him eminently suitable for directing home affairs, when he dealt with foreign affairs he was at best a neophyte, and at worst incompetent. Prior to taking over as Prime Minister,

¹ Anthony Eden, *The Eden Memoirs: Facing the Dictators* (London: Cassell, 1962), 501.

² *Ibid.*, 502.

Chamberlain told Eden “I know that you won’t mind if I take more interest in foreign policy than [Baldwin],” and was as good as his word.⁴ For Eden, the initial anticipation of working with Chamberlain began to wear thin after only a few weeks.

Chamberlain’s half-brother (and former Foreign Secretary), Austen Chamberlain, once told him, “Neville, you must remember you don’t know anything about foreign affairs,” a solid piece of advice that the future Prime Minister studiously ignored.⁵

Where Eden and Chamberlain differed was experience. While all politics and diplomacy revolve around the personalities involved, in Chamberlain’s experience the personalities were all British, while Eden had dealt extensively with foreign leaders and had a better grasp of that which motivated the likes of Hitler and Mussolini. In fairness, it can be said that no one in the diplomatic community truly understood Hitler and Mussolini, but at least Eden had had the opportunity to develop a healthy distrust of them, where Chamberlain remained mired in Victorian concepts of honor among national leaders.

The new Prime Minister had a full plate. In mid-1937 the diplomatic picture in Europe was deteriorating rapidly, and only the most starry-eyed idealist could fail to see that a major war was in the offing. One of the bright spots (more accurately “less dark spots”) at the time appeared to be the Non-Intervention patrol around Spain. Since it began on April 20, arms shipments and the ingress of foreign volunteers had decreased noticeably, and the scheme seemed to be working.⁶ But Neville Chamberlain did not get

³ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 405.

⁴ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 501.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 502.

⁶ “The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War”, [1938], ADM 116/3677, Great Britain, Admiralty, Public Record Office, London (Kew), England.

the opportunity to influence foreign policy before the naval patrol began to come unglued.

Republican aircraft bombed the German *Panzerschiffe* (armored ship) *Deutschland* lying at anchor off Ibiza in the Balearics on the evening of May 27, 1937. Two Loyalist aircraft, approaching from the west, flew out of the sun and dropped their ordnance on the unwary “pocket battleship”, scoring hits with a pair of 250-pound bombs. One of the projectiles struck the shield of the forward 5.9-inch gun on the starboard side, started a fire that burned for over two hours, and disabled a crane, but caused no casualties. The second bomb penetrated the deck forward, and detonated in a crew mess area. The ships’ crew had stood down prior to engaging in a refueling evolution, so the mess was crowded with sailors. The final casualty toll numbered thirty-one dead and sixty-seven wounded.⁷ The following day, *Deutschland* put into Gibraltar to drop off some injured sailors for treatment at the hospital there.

The incident carried potentially grave consequences. The mining of the British destroyer HMS *Hunter* and the attack on the Italian cruiser *Barletta* had been against vessels serving governments that had good reason to be cautious, and were essentially written off as part of the cost of doing business. Under normal circumstances, one might

⁷ Message from Vice-Admiral (Gibraltar) to Admiralty, May 30, 1937. *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939 Second Series, Vol. 18: European Affairs, January 2-June 30, 1937* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1979): 824. Hereafter referred to as *DBFP 18*. The *Deutschland* displaced over 11,000 tons, mounted six-11” and eight-5.9” guns, and carried a complement of nearly 1,000 men. Launched in 1931, her completion coincided with Hitler’s ascension to power and was accompanied with great fanfare as the symbol of the resurrection of German naval power. No doubt the fact that the ship bombed was the one named after the “Fatherland” helped to fuel Hitler’s rage.

lodge a protest or file a claim, as the British and Italians did. Hitler, on the other hand, did not feel bound by any diplomatic protocols, and simply gave vent to his fury over the loss of German lives by retaliating directly.

A sister ship of the *Deutschland*, the *Admiral Scheer*, was despatched in company with a cruiser and four destroyers to exact revenge. On the night of May 30/31, the German squadron appeared off Almería and, over the course of several hours, shelled the town, causing extensive damage to port facilities and waterfront buildings, and killing nineteen civilians.⁸

The Republican government then had its turn to be enraged by the German reaction. The administration in Valencia, having recently undergone a shake-up ending in the installation of Juan Negrín as Prime Minister, actually dallied with the idea of bombing German warships wherever they could be found. The rationale behind this somewhat extreme notion, brainchild of Minister of National Defense Indalecio Prieto, was that if Germany could be provoked into entering the conflict in substantial strength, then the Soviets, French, and English would follow, and pretty soon a world war would erupt. The upshot was that the rebels would be deprived of German aid – the Germans would need it for themselves – and the Republic could then accept aid openly. Thus rearmed and revitalized, the Loyalists could roll Franco and his minions up and put an end to the rebellion.⁹

⁸ *Times* (London), June 1, 1937. See also, Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, Revised and Enlarged Edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 685, and Stephen Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars*, 2 Vols., (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 2: 382. Hereafter referred to as *Naval Policy*, 2.

⁹ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 686.

Although the idea had a certain philosophical attraction to it, given that Germany was aiding the enemies of the Republic, for such lunacy to even be considered showed the desperation that was beginning to creep into the Republican leadership. Obviously, there were no guarantees that Spain would not be completely destroyed in the process before any aid could flow in from outside, and besides, the same forces acting on Germany would likewise act upon any potential ally of the Republic - Britain, France, and the USSR would need everything they had to fight their own war. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed. Negrín suggested that everyone sleep on it, and the delay allowed some communists in the cabinet to apprise Moscow of developments. Word quickly came back that Stalin would not be pleased to be drawn into a world war at that time, and the Almería incident died a quiet death.¹⁰ It should be noted, however, that no more stray bombs fell on German naval units.

The *Deutschland* incident, as the latest and most serious in a series of attacks both active and passive (mines) on Non-Intervention Patrol vessels, gave Hitler an excuse to further stir up the already muddy waters of the NIC. On June 1st, Hitler announced that Germany would

. . . discontinue to participate in the control scheme as well as the discussions of the Non-Intervention Committee as long as they have not received all guarantees against the recurrence of such events. The German Government will of course decide of their own upon the steps which are to be taken in reply to this incredibly

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

malicious attack. They also have issued orders to their men-of-war during this state of affairs to repel by fire any approaching Spanish aircraft or men-of-war.¹¹ Mussolini immediately jumped on the bandwagon and called a halt to Italian participation in the NIC as well.¹² Significantly, neither Germany nor Italy withdrew any vessels from duty off the Spanish coast, and Germany in fact increased its presence by sending the light cruiser *Leipzig* and four destroyers to Spain, soon followed by four U-boats¹³

The NIC was essentially back at square one. With the civil war in Spain now nearly one year old, the members of the Chairman's Subcommittee (NIC(CS)), and by extension the rest of the NIC, found themselves debating the same three issues that remained dominant – controlling arms transfers, withdrawing volunteers, and belligerent status – with the added burden of having to deal with a Germany and Italy that appeared more contrary than ever before. The lack of progress in the NIC had the added effect of placing some distance between Britain and France, while simultaneously drawing Germany and Italy still closer together.

Secretary Eden labored to patch up the control scheme. Over the short term, he proposed that British and French warships should split the areas formerly patrolled by the Germans and Italians along Spain's Mediterranean coast, while concurrently negotiating conditions under which the dictators might willingly return their ships to the patrol and

¹¹ *DBFP* 18, 825, n3.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Times* (London), June 1, 1937: 16.

their representatives to the NIC itself.¹⁴ Hitler's reaction, with Mussolini's support, gave every impression that the axis might escalate the situation. Although Eden never really believed that either dictator wanted to precipitate a general war, he nonetheless had to recognize the possibility, and so did everything he could to pacify Hitler, from condemning the bombing of *Deutschland* to downplaying the shelling of Almería.¹⁵

After a series of discussions, mostly with Germany's ambassador to Great Britain, Joachim von Ribbentrop, Eden proposed that a "solemn promise" be extracted from both sides in Spain to refrain from bombing foreign ships, and designate safe areas in Spanish ports. Violations would result in consultations among the four countries involved in the patrol to decide any further action. Hitler agreed to this proposal, with the *proviso* that German ships would defend themselves if attacked. He also agreed to send his foreign minister, von Neurath, to London for talks with the new Chamberlain administration, with a view (from the British perspective at least) toward improving Anglo-German relations.¹⁶ On June 12th, Germany and Italy returned to the NIC, and their naval vessels resumed patrolling their assigned areas. For the next week the situation returned to "normal", if such a term could be considered appropriate: the possibility of a general war was still there (it always would be), but the probability of such an occurrence had been minimized once again.

By mid June, 1937, the Republic's hold on the Biscay coast of Spain had become tenuous. Bilbao, capital of the Basque country, was on the verge of surrendering. Gijón

¹⁴ Eden to Sir N. Henderson (Berlin), June 2, 1937. *DBFP* 18, 836.

¹⁵ Wm. L. Kleine-Ahlbrandt, *The Policy of Simmering: A Study in British Policy During the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), 56.

and Santander were cut off from easy resupply, and the occupation of the entire area by Nationalist forces could only be a matter of time (See Map 5). The rebel navy based at Ferrol, while small in numbers, had easy access to the Biscay coastline and could interdict the only supply line left open to the loyalists. Republican naval forces ventured from port only cautiously, and were confined to the Mediterranean in any case. Since the conflict had found a measure of stability in the south the previous December, the focus of the fighting moved to the north. Although the war continued unabated elsewhere, the front lines changed relatively little. The most significant Nationalist gains in 1937 occurred along a strip of northern Spain less than 100 miles deep, extending from just east of Bilbao some 250 miles westward, with ground forces pushing from the east, mainly against Bilbao, supported by a partial blockade from seaward led by the light cruiser *Almirante Cervera*, along with a handful of destroyers and smaller craft.¹⁷ Bilbao itself fell on June 19, with its extensive industrial and munitions facilities, and from that point on the fate of the rest of Republican northern Spain was sealed, although it held out in gradually diminishing strength until the latter part of October.

The Royal Navy occupied itself with the dual missions of protecting British shipping in international waters, and maintaining its part of the Non-Intervention Patrol. The relative isolation of the area from the rest of Republican Spain simplified the Non-Intervention aspect of the assignment, in that the vast majority of military supplies entering the loyalist areas did so in the south, greater emphasis in the north being placed

¹⁶ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 503.

on more general consumables such as food and medicines. The Nationalist blockade made the situation inherently more hazardous, and encounters between British and Nationalist vessels took place regularly.

To accomplish its assigned tasks, the Royal Navy maintained a flotilla of destroyers and a squadron of capital ships on station.¹⁸ In order to keep up such a presence for an extended period of time, a second destroyer flotilla needed to be available for relief. The vessels on station deployed half their strength actually patrolling with the other half refueling and refitting in port. On the Mediterranean coast, British ships used Gibraltar as a base of operations, and on the Biscay coast, St. Jean de Luz in southern France. As the war ground on, Britain's naval presence did decrease somewhat on average, especially along the northern coast as the Nationalists gained progressively greater control of the area, and a squadron of minesweepers was used to relieve some destroyers of the tedious patrol duty for a month during the summer of 1937.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the operational tempo maintained by the Royal Navy off the coast of Spain meant additional wear and tear on men and machines already stretched by an extended period of heightened activity prior to their involvement in Spain, especially during the Abyssinian crisis. Naval vessels require constant maintenance to stay operational; destroyers in particular, with their light scantlings and temperamental power plants, are

¹⁷ "The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War", ADM 116/3677, PRO.

¹⁸ A flotilla of destroyers usually consisted of eight destroyers (DD) and a destroyer leader (DL); a squadron of capital ships usually consisted of two battleships (BB) or battlescruisers (BC). *Navy List*.

¹⁹ *Times* (London), June 16, 1937: 15. A minesweeper of the time displaced 800 tons and carried a complement of about 80 men; it was roughly half the size of a destroyer. Minesweepers were smaller, slower, more lightly armed, and much less imposing than destroyers. *Jane's Fighting Ships of World War II* (1947 New York: Random House, 1986): 70.

susceptible to breakdown and in need of constant care. The Admiralty made plans to thin out its forces off Spain, and even followed through on some of the plans, but as long as the situation remained unpredictable, the British leaders realized the need to maintain enough force on station to handle contingencies.

On the Spanish political front, the most significant event for the Nationalists occurred on June 3, 1937, when an airplane carrying General Emilio Mola crashed, killing all aboard. Commander of the Nationalists' northern forces, General Mola represented the only realistic alternative to General Franco as the leader of the rebellion. No precise cause for the crash was ever established, but there was no reason to believe it to be anything other than an accident – airplanes still crashed fairly regularly in 1937. Most important, Franco now held undisputed leadership of the Nationalist cause.²⁰

No single event had the same impact for the Republicans, but by the middle of 1937 the structure of the Loyalist government was changing to reflect the increased influence of the USSR, and that fact decreased the intensity of pro-Republican opinion in England.²¹ While the British people in general had little love for fascism, the government in general had no more love for communism. In Parliament, Winston Churchill voiced the prevailing opinion:

I will not pretend that, if I had to choose between Communism and Nazi-ism, I would choose Communism. I hope not to be called upon to survive in the world under a government of either of those Dispensations. ... I am not able to throw

²⁰ Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 689-690.

²¹ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 646-647.

myself in this headlong fashion into the risk of having to fire cannon on the one side or the other of this trouble.²²

The thought of a communist government in Spain dampened enthusiasm for the Republic, and the slowly dawning realization that there would be no general war as a result of events in Spain led to a trend of ever increasing apathy regarding the situation in that country and greater concern for other issues. Relations between the major powers of Europe were tied into events in Spain to some extent, so what happened there could not be ignored completely. For the British at least, emphasis could shift to efforts aimed at improving relations between themselves and the Germans and Italians without being overly concerned about a major war brewing up around them in the short term.²³ But the short term still needed to be dealt with, and it took a while for opinion to shift. The Royal Navy still had forces deployed in harm's way, there were British economic interests at stake in the civil war, and concern for Spain's territorial integrity had not yet been completely allayed.²⁴ In addition, while historians can look back and see the progression of events clearly and put them into historical perspective, the men on the spot had to resolve each crisis as it arose, with no way of knowing what effect their decisions might have – and there was no shortage of crises.

On June 15, 1937, and again on the 18th – less than three weeks after the *Deutschland* incident and less than one week after German and Italian ships returned to

²² *Parliamentary Debates*, 5th Series, House of Commons Official Report, 2nd Session of the 37th Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, George VI, Vol. 322: 1063.

²³ “Memorandum on the probability of war with Italy”, June 15, 1937, *DBFP* 18: 890-896. See also Roskill, *Naval Policy*, 2: 380.

²⁴ “Memorandum on the probability of war with Italy”, June 15, 1937, *DBFP* 18: 890-896.

the Non-Intervention Patrol – the German light cruiser *Leipzig*, newly arrived in the Mediterranean, reported being attacked by torpedoes fired by an unknown submarine off the North African coast near Oran, Algiers. According to the communiqué sent to the NIC powers by the German government, the captain of the *Leipzig* claimed that his ship was fired on three times on the morning of the 15th, and once on the afternoon of the 18th. No one saw a periscope, but the “course of the torpedoes was followed by hydrophone” on the 15th, and “[t]he swell caused by the discharge” of the fourth torpedo, on the 18th, was “clearly observed by several sure observers,” and “clearly registered by hydrophone as it passed across the cruiser’s bows.”²⁵

The Germans accused the Republicans of being behind the attacks, and called for meetings between representatives of the four NIC members involved in the patrol to discuss possible responses. A series of talks took place between June 19th and June 23rd, with the British pressing for stern warnings, an inquiry to ascertain the facts of the incident, and a proposal to ban the use of submerged submarines by all parties in Spain including NIC naval forces.²⁶ The Axis representatives wanted a “naval demonstration” of unspecified form outside of Valencia to express displeasure over the attacks, and they did not want an inquiry into the event because they insisted that they already knew who was behind it.²⁷ As a further expression of irritation, Hitler canceled the forthcoming visit to England by his Foreign Minister, Von Neurath, and, on the 23rd, announced that Germany would no longer participate in the patrol. Mussolini, true to form, imitated

²⁵ von Ribbentrop to Eden, June 19, 1937, *DBFP* 18: 911-912

²⁶ “Record of meeting held at the House of Commons on June 21 at 3 p.m. to consider the incidents in which the German cruiser *Leipzig* was involved on June 15 and June 18,” *DBFP* 18: 920-921.

Hitler and also withdrew from the patrol, although this time neither pulled out of the NIC itself.²⁸ At the same time, Portugal also withdrew from the control agreement.²⁹ After June 23rd, 1937, the Non-Intervention Patrol was defunct, and, for all practical purposes, so was the NIC.

The most interesting aspect of the whole *Leipzig* incident was that it probably never happened.³⁰ The *Leipzig* was in the area claimed at the times stated, but no crewmember spotted any evidence of a submarine, such as a periscope or a torpedo wake, the hydrophone equipment available at the time was notoriously unreliable, and even the captain of the *Leipzig* later reported that the supposed attack had been a false alarm.³¹ The French Foreign Minister, Yvon Delbos, wanted to interview crewmembers of the *Leipzig*, but was refused.³² The Axis leaders saw no need to cloud the issue with facts because they gained too much from the whole episode. By eliminating the patrol, surveillance along the coast would be less effective, and sending aid to the Nationalists made easier. By keeping the level of tension high in the NIC, they furthered the aim of driving a wedge between Great Britain and France. The *Leipzig* incident also set the stage for the last major crisis to face the NIC.

On July 14, 1937, after nearly a month of discussions in the NIC (CS), Eden proposed a compromise solution to the control problem. Under his proposal, the NIC

²⁷ "Extract from Cabinet Conclusions No. 25(37) of June 21, 1937," *DBFP* 18: 921-924.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ "Sir Neville Henderson (Berlin) to Eden (Received June 21, 6.30 p.m.)," *DBFP* 18: 918-920.

³⁰ "Letter from Chancery (Rome) to Western Department (Foreign Office), June 24, 1937," *DBFP* 18: 936.

³¹ Robert H. Whealey, *Hitler and Spain* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989): 111.

³² *Ibid.*, 210 n140.

powers would grant belligerent status to both sides in the civil war in exchange for the removal of all foreigners in the ranks of both sides. In this way, the need for the control agreement would be eliminated, and a great deal of pressure taken off the NIC.

Discussions on the subject continued in the NIC (CS) for the rest of the civil war, never reaching a conclusion, and in any case the attention of the NIC was diverted by its latest and greatest crisis. The war ended before the “volunteers” went home, belligerent status was never granted, and arms shipments trended upward once again after June, 1937.

At this juncture, the first cracks began to appear between Neville Chamberlain and Anthony Eden. While the two agreed on ends, they disagreed on means. Both wanted to divide the Axis dictators. But Eden felt that it was pointless to negotiate with Mussolini because he had proven to be utterly unreliable in keeping his word, and thought that the best route would be to deal with Hitler to achieve a measure of stability in Europe. Chamberlain, on the other hand, saw Mussolini as the weaker of the two dictators, and wanted to use the Italian leader in an effort to split the Axis. On July 29th, Chamberlain sent a private letter to Mussolini proposing talks between the two leaders to resolve their differences.³³ Mussolini wanted Britain to recognize Italy’s Abyssinian conquests, and Chamberlain wanted to settle the situation in the Mediterranean. Making such a move was certainly the prerogative of the Prime Minister, but he did so without informing his Foreign Minister. Eden did not take offense at first, seeing the episode as simply a “slip by a Prime Minister new to foreign affairs,” but it became apparent later that Chamberlain had deliberately left Eden out of the decision because he “had the

feeling that [Eden] would object to it.”³⁴ It was in the Prime Minister’s power to make foreign policy – Eden’s biggest complaint about Baldwin had been his lack of interest in foreign affairs – but leaving the Foreign Minister out of what could be perceived as a major foreign policy initiative was not an action calculated to develop trust, if not a deliberate insult.

At the beginning of August, reports reached Rome from Franco’s government that massive shipments of aid from the USSR were arriving in the Republican camp.³⁵ The Nationalists requested that Italy use its navy to interdict the supplies, or provide the naval vessels to the rebels so they could do the job themselves. Mussolini refused to supply Franco with ships, but agreed to interfere on his own. Beginning on August 6, 1937, Italian aircraft and naval vessels (primarily submarines) commenced secret operations against vessels carrying arms to the Republic.

During August and September, the “piratical” attacks on merchant and naval vessels in the Mediterranean captured the attention of all of Europe (see Map 7). During this time, thirty-eight ships were attacked, of which nine were sunk and eight damaged. Italian aircraft operating from Majorca accounted for several of the attacks, and Italian destroyers also participated, but submarines caused the majority of the damage.³⁶ Submarines stationed in the Aegean, the Sicily channel (between Sicily and Tunisia), and around the Balearic Islands, attacked without warning, provoking widespread concern

³³ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 738-739.

³⁴ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 510-511.

³⁵ John F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975): 306.

³⁶ Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 307.

over piracy in the Mediterranean by “mystery” submarines.³⁷ By covering the choke points of the Dardanelles and the Sicily channel, Italian forces succeeded in preventing Soviet supplies from reaching the Republic from ports in the Black Sea throughout September, although quite a lot got through in August.³⁸

The British were not fooled. The Admiralty’s recently established Operational Intelligence Center (OIC) broke the Italian naval cipher earlier in 1937, so the “secret” Italian operations were known to the British almost from the start.³⁹ Orders went out to the Mediterranean fleet on August 18, 1937, directing naval commanders to defend British shipping against submarine attack.⁴⁰ The Admiralty dispatched more ships to augment the British destroyer force in the Mediterranean. On August 31, the Royal Navy destroyer H.M.S. *Havock* was attacked by a submarine (later determined to be the Italian *Iride*) in the western Mediterranean near Almería. The torpedoes missed the destroyer, which proceeded to attack with depth charges. Despite a solid sonar contact and help from other British destroyers in the area, the submarine got away.⁴¹

Unfortunately, diplomatic niceties prevented the English government from openly accusing a leader of Mussolini’s stature of piracy, so a more subtle approach was needed. At the beginning of September, Eden accepted a French suggestion of a meeting between representatives of the Mediterranean nations and those with an interest in the

³⁷ Raoul Genet, “The Charge of Piracy in the Spanish Civil War,” *The American Journal of International Law* 32 (April, 1938): 253-263.

³⁸ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 741 n2.

³⁹ Roskill, *Naval Policy* 2: 388.

⁴⁰ “Message from C-in-C Mediterranean to Mediterranean Station,” August 18, 1937, *Documents on British Foreign Policy Second Series, Vol. 19: European Affairs July 1, 1937-August 4, 1938* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1982): 184. Publication hereafter referred to as *DBFP* 19.

⁴¹ Roskill, *Naval Policy* 2, 383.

current situation (i.e. England and the USSR) to see about resolving the crisis.⁴² A meeting was arranged for September 10th in the village of Nyon, Switzerland, fourteen miles from Geneva. Even though Germany and Italy declined to send representatives, the meeting went off without a hitch, and produced an agreement by the 14th.

There were three reasons for the unprecedented diplomatic efficiency displayed at Nyon. In the first place, the conference covered only the specific issue of attacks on shipping in the Mediterranean and kept away from how those attacks related to the situation in Spain, which eliminated the need for participation from the NIC, with its long history of inefficiency and delay.⁴³ In the second place, Germany and Italy were absent from the conference, and thus unable to interfere with or delay the proceedings.⁴⁴ In the third place, the British and French spent some time before the conference discussing strategies to be employed, which resulted in a concerted plan of attack being presented to the conference for approval. By coming to the meetings already prepared, they stole a march on the other delegates and were able to ramrod their proposals through with minimal delay. The fact that Germany, Italy, and the NIC were absent certainly helped the situation.

⁴² Eden to Lloyd Thomas (Paris), September 2, 1937, *DBFP* 19: 228-229. See also, Kleine-Ahlbrandt, *The Policy of Simmering*, 65.

⁴³ "C. A. Edmond (Geneva) to Foreign Office," September 10, 1937, *DBFP* 19: 268.

⁴⁴ "Ingram (Rome) to Eden," September 7, 1937, *DBFP* 19: 238. The USSR claimed to have "indisputable proof" that Italy was behind the submarine attacks, and threatened to release it if Italy sent representatives to the conference. Because of this threat, Mussolini declined to send a delegation, and was supported by Hitler, who also declined. As it turned out, the Soviets were bluffing. See also, Kleine-Ahlbrandt, *The Policy of Simmering*, 64.

The agreement itself was brief and to the point. Signed on September 14th by the representatives of Great Britain, France, Bulgaria, Egypt, Greece, Rumania, Turkey, Yugoslavia, and the USSR, the operative paragraph read in part:

Any submarine which attacks such a ship in a manner contrary to the rules of international law referred to in the International Treaty for the Limitation of Naval Armaments signed in London on November 22, 1930, ... shall be counter-attacked and, if possible, destroyed.⁴⁵

In a supplementary agreement signed on the 17th, the same conditions were extended to aircraft and surface ships.⁴⁶

To enforce the agreement, vessels from the participating nations were authorized to patrol their own coastal waters, while the British and French committed their navies to patrolling the high seas. The participants also agreed to allow British and French ships into their territorial waters if necessary to prosecute an attack, and pledged to keep their own submarines on the surface while in international waters to prevent any accidents.⁴⁷ With the demise of the Non-Intervention Patrol, both the Royal Navy and the French navy had the wherewithal available to beef up their destroyer forces in the Mediterranean in support of the Nyon agreement, and that was done forthwith. The attacks by “mystery” submarines ceased.

The Nyon conference marked the first successful instance of international cooperation limiting aggression since the start of the Spanish Civil War. It also marked

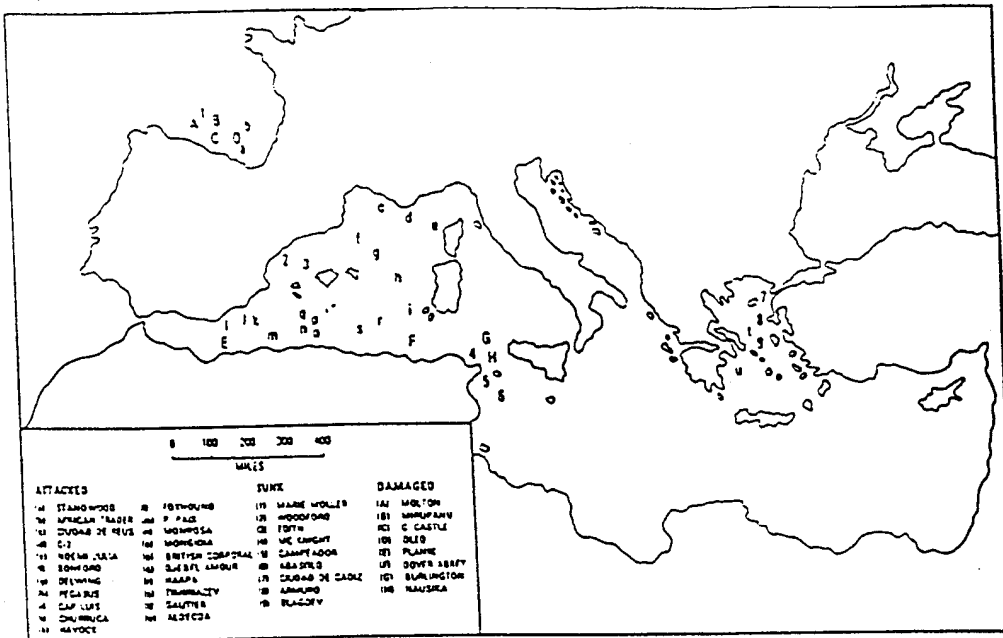
⁴⁵ “The Nyon Arrangement, September 14, 1937”, *The American Journal of International Law* 31 (October, 1937), “Official Documents,” 179-182.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

the end of serious international concern over the Spanish Civil War. While the Italians, Germans, Soviets, and (to some extent) French continued to send aid to the combatants, it was now quite clear that a major war over Spain would not occur. With that realization, the British government concentrated on improving the situation between itself and the other major powers in Europe. Eden resigned in February, 1938, over differences between himself and Chamberlain over the appeasement of the Axis dictators. The Royal Navy operated as part of the Nyon patrol until the end of the Spanish Civil War, and operated in defense of British shipping off the coast of Spain until the same time.

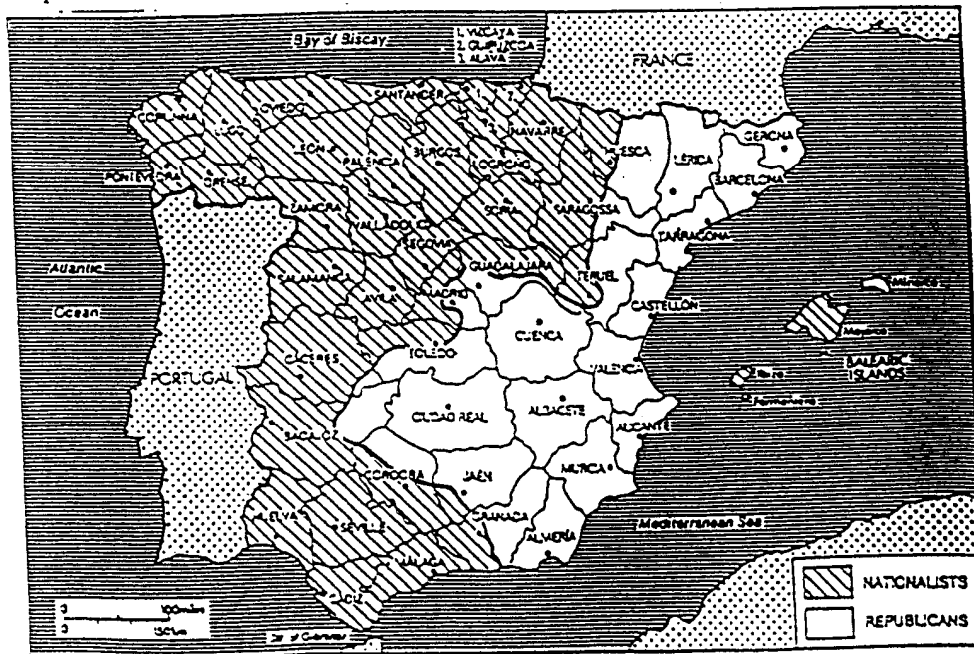
⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Map 7: Naval Incidents in the Mediterranean, August - September, 1937.



Robert H. Whealey, *Hitler and Spain: The Nazi Role in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 58, map 3.

Map 8: The division of Spain, October, 1937.



Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War, Revised and Enlarged Edition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 732, map 30.

CHAPTER 6

EPILOGUE AND CONCLUSIONS

The Nyon Conference was important for a number of reasons, especially as an instrument of collective security. For the first time, and only time, representatives from widely different nations assembled together and produced a document that actually had some teeth. The Nyon agreement stated, in no uncertain terms, that any submarine, surface ship, or aircraft, engaged in illegal “piratical” activity on the high seas, would be “attacked and, if possible, destroyed.”¹ Once the agreement was signed, Italy, in an effort to save some face for having been excluded from the proceedings, also came on board. Working on the theory that the best way to keep an eye on a fox is to provide it with a safe hen house, the participants agreed to allow the Italian navy to patrol the Tyrrhenian Sea, in its own back yard. Italian naval intervention – as opposed to Non-Intervention – ceased altogether for several months, only to be resumed on a smaller scale in the spring of 1938, but it never again reached the level of August-September, 1937.² In reality, by equating the cessation of “piracy” in the Mediterranean with the events at Nyon, the participants committed the *post hoc ergo proctor hoc* logical fallacy:

¹ “The Nyon Arrangement, September 14, 1937,” *The American Journal of International Law* 31 (October, 1937), “Official Documents,” 179. “Piracy” is a legal term, generally construed to mean deprivations on the high seas for private economic gain. Use of the term was inaccurate in a legal sense in the case of the submarine attacks because they were not committed for private ends. See Raoul Genet, “The Charge of Piracy in the Spanish Civil War,” *The American Journal of International Law* 32 (April, 1938): 253-263.

² Stephen W. Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars.*, 2 vols., (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 2: 387-389. Hereafter referred to as *Naval Policy*, 2.

Mussolini had ordered the attacks to stop before the conference because of the uproar being caused.³ From a more abstract perspective, Nyon “proved” to the international community that a bully could be stopped if threatened with credible force. But the Nyon conference was deliberately limited in scope and tailored to address a specific issue. All agreed that merchant ships being torpedoed on the high seas during peacetime was a bad thing and must be stopped; achieving a similar consensus on the larger issue of Axis aggression in Europe, with similar forcefulness, proved to be impossible.

After Nyon, British foreign policy changed direction to emphasize restoration of good relations with Italy. Chamberlain saw Italy as the key to stopping the Axis, while Eden no longer saw any point in dealing with someone as duplicitous as Mussolini. Chamberlain offered to recognize Italy’s Abyssinian conquests in return for an agreement to remove Italian troops from Spain, implying that the agreement itself, and not actual removal, would suffice to bring recognition. Eden insisted that removal should come first and, on the basis of that disagreement, resigned from office on February 20, 1938.⁴ Eden had impeccable timing. By quitting just before Chamberlain’s appeasement policies got into full swing, he cemented his reputation as an anti-appeaser, a reputation that vaulted him to higher office later in his career.

After Hitler’s annexation of Austria in March, 1938, events in Spain moved to a permanent spot low on the British diplomatic agenda. Once Franco’s true nationalist

³ *Ibid.*, 386-387. See also, John F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975): 316.

⁴ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 421-423.

character was understood, the fear of Spain allowing itself to be used as a springboard for fascist domination of western Europe no longer held sway. Although the civil war in Spain did not end until April 1, 1939, the critical events of 1938 and 1939, which involved Austria and Czechoslovakia, had nothing to do with Spain. Britain waited until there could be no doubt that Franco would win, and finally recognized the Nationalists as the government of Spain on February 27, 1939.

The Non-Intervention Committee (NIC) remained in existence, but even less effective than ever before, if that was possible. After Eden's proposal of July 14, 1937, offering belligerent status in exchange for removal of volunteers, the full NIC met to debate the proposal on July 20th, with no decision. The same proposal was debated again in November, 1937, and yet again in July, 1938, still with no result. The NIC Chairman's Subcommittee met more regularly, with equal success. The full NIC did not meet again until April 20, 1939, nearly three weeks after Franco's victory, when it dissolved itself and faded into the obscurity it deserved.

The Royal Navy maintained a strong presence off the coast of Spain until the end of the civil war. In fact, Nyon had caused an increase in forces, because now the scope of naval involvement covered the entire Mediterranean and not just the Spanish littoral. At its peak, the British naval contribution to the Nyon patrol numbered 36 destroyers, four full flotillas, or almost half of the Royal Navy's total active destroyer strength.⁵ The missions remained the same: to protect shipping on the high seas, and to perform

⁵ Roskill, *Naval Policy*, 2: 385. There were also heavier units deployed, cruisers and capital ships, plus auxiliaries, but the destroyers were the only ships suitable for anti-submarine work. Considering the scope

humanitarian tasks. British warships carried thousands of Loyalist refugees from Spain in the final days of the conflict, including the Republican government on its way to exile in France.⁶

The most daring rescue of the entire war came in the early hours of March 6, 1938, off Cape Palos, near Cartagena. Two British ships, the destroyer leader H.M.S. *Kempenfeldt*, Capt. C.S. Holland, and destroyer *Boreas*, Lt. Cdr. G. B. Roope, observed flashes on the horizon from gunfire and explosions, and raced to investigate. A Nationalist convoy escorted by three cruisers had encountered a Republican force of two cruisers and some destroyers. In the ensuing melee the Nationalist cruiser *Baleares* received at least one torpedo hit, which caused the ship to break in half. When the British destroyers arrived on the scene, *Baleares*'s squadron mates were gone, and all that remained of the stricken ship was the battered stern section, on fire amid strewn wreckage and oil "many inches thick."⁷ The British ships lowered their boats to rescue those men in the water, and *Kempenfeldt* managed to get along side what was left of the *Baleares* and secure a line in an effort to rescue those remaining aboard the burning wreck. Many of the Spanish sailors were rescued, but the *Baleares* sank before all of them could be removed. *Kempenfeldt* was forced to pull away at that time, but returned immediately to pick up those survivors still in the water. Between them, the English warships rescued 470 men.

of the naval responsibilities of the Empire, employing such a large proportion of its escort ships on this single task meant that other tasks would inevitably be neglected.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 390.

⁷ "The British Navy in the Spanish Civil War," [1938], ADM 116/3677, Great Britain, Admiralty, Public Record Office, London (Kew), England..

With daylight, the other two Nationalist cruisers reappeared, along with another pair of British destroyers. Most of the survivors from the *Baleares* were transferred to the Spanish ships, the most seriously wounded remaining aboard *Kempenfeldt*. During the transfer operation, some Republican aircraft attacked the ships and four sailors aboard *Boreas* were wounded by splinters from near misses. *Kempenfeldt* then accompanied the Spanish vessels to Palma to unload the rescued sailors.⁸

The *Baleares* incident reflected the highest standards of professionalism and training. The officers and men of *Kempenfeldt* and *Boreas* placed themselves in considerable danger, and performed extremely well. Ranging a ship along side a burning wreck, at night, amid wreckage and burning fuel, was no easy task, and fraught with hazards. If not for the “courageous and unselfish work” of the ships of the Royal Navy, performed “under the most difficult and exacting conditions,” the toll from the sinking of the *Baleares* would have been much higher.⁹

Britain conducted its policy toward Spain on two levels, with the diplomats on the one hand, and the Royal Navy on the other. Of the two, the navy proved more successful, but it had the easier job. While the diplomats labored to keep the peace, the navy maintained a strong presence to discourage war.

The Royal Navy performed its missions during the Spanish Civil War honorably and well. Tasked with fulfilling multiple, sometimes conflicting, missions, the professionalism of the men in its ranks was evident throughout the conflict. From admirals on down the ranks, these would be the men to see the navy through the first

⁸ *Ibid.*

months of the coming world war. Admirals Pound, Ramsey, Cunningham, Somerville, and Blake all served in Spain and went on to higher commands in 1939-1945. Lt. Cdr. Roope, commander of *Boreas*, earned a posthumous Victoria Cross for action during the Norwegian campaign of 1940 when he rammed the German heavy cruiser *Blücher* with his destroyer, H.M.S. *Glowworm*. The training accumulated off Spain, especially in evacuating people while under pressure, also served the Royal Navy well in the coming conflict.

There was one major lesson that the Royal Navy should have learned, but did not. The *Havock* incident of August, 1937, should have warned the navy that ASDIC was not as effective as it was thought. It seemed that under actual operational conditions the new miracle anti-submarine weapon did not function as well as it did in practice, but that lesson was ignored, and the price paid later.¹⁰ In sum, the Royal Navy units that served in the Spanish conflict did so with efficiency and professionalism, and were generally a credit to the service.

British diplomats also served with professionalism, but efficiency was an unknown concept. Opinion on Spain was too divided, among all of the participants on the diplomatic scene, for any consensus to be formed.

For all of its ineffectiveness, Non-Intervention was really the best answer to a thorny problem. Although English opinion generally favored the Republic, a substantial minority, driven mostly by fear of communism, supported the Nationalists. Virtually all agreed that Britain should avoid a war. The government had three options. They could

⁹ *Ibid.*

either ignore the situation, or actively support one side or the other, or become engaged in such a way as to have some voice in the matter while avoiding deep involvement.

The first choice, while theoretically possible, lacked practicality. With emotions high, and other countries actively involved, Britain could not retreat into a shell to await the outcome of events. The second choice was even less practical, because it avoided the overriding principle of British Policy: the voters did not want the general war that full involvement would likely engender. His Majesty's Government was left with the third choice, and the Non-Intervention policy theoretically fit the requirements as a reasonable compromise.

In principle, the Non-Intervention policy allowed the situation in Spain to be contained while at the same time not interfering excessively in internal Spanish matters. The fact that Non-Intervention did not work as intended did not negate the fact that Britain's two main policy goals toward Spain were fulfilled: Spain retained its territorial integrity, and a general war did not break out over Spain.

Where British policy fell short was in its long range view, or lack thereof. While so preoccupied with the events in Spain, the British, from the Prime Minister, to the Cabinet, to the Foreign Office, failed to grasp the larger intentions of the Axis dictators. In general, the British knew what they did not want, while the Axis leaders knew what they wanted. The British did not want war, and operated under the premise that talking is always better than killing, but the Axis wanted domination, and did not mind killing to achieve their ends. In fact, German and Italian propaganda glorified killing in order to

¹⁰ Roskill, *Naval Policy* 2: 383.

achieve their ends. Trying to co-opt such men as Hitler and Mussolini into supporting something like disarmament or collective security was, in retrospect, an exercise in futility.

For a historian, seeing events in their totality lends them a clarity that was certainly not available at the time they took place. For the man on the spot, the correct decision must be made based on incomplete, or incorrect, or out-of-date information. It is too easy to assert that the diplomats of the time were so preoccupied with individual trees that they could not make out the shape of the forest. The problem was that there were so many trees, and they were so close. But even bearing that in mind, the British and their allies misread the Axis leaders, and there was no excuse for it. Both Hitler and Mussolini had published material available for all who cared to look that outlined their intentions in detail.

In the final analysis, Britain's Non-Intervention policy in Spain was the best available at the time, but it reflected the limitations of the British Empire. Shaken by World War One and weakened both in the mind and the sword-arm by the subsequent flurry of fine treaty making and flawed attempts at collective security, the inherent weakness of the Empire dictated a weak policy. The British needed to decide if they wanted to be a great empire or not. If so, then they needed to behave like one, at least to the extent of presenting a credible defense of their possessions. It could be called "speaking softly and carrying a big stick," or "peace through superior firepower," or any other appropriate sobriquet, but the end result would still be the same: enhanced security.

Adopting weak policies, at first by choice and then by necessity, only encouraged the totalitarians to be ever more aggressive.

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