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Spain

By [Javier Ponce](#)

This article examines Spain's neutrality during the Great War, highlighting factors such as the lack of military resources; the division of public opinion and internal conflicts; and actors such as King Alfonso XIII (whose mediating role helped to determine Spain's neutral position). It also analyses the impact of the war in Spain until the immediate post-war period – unequal economic growth, social mobilisation, and political crisis. Primary and secondary sources lead us to conclude that Spain had to maintain neutrality: the matter was simply non-negotiable. However, the final crisis of Spain's political system was the result of the previously unseen social and ideological mobilisation.

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Introduction

Certain books have become obligatory reading over the past few decades in the historiography of [Spanish neutrality](#) during the First World War. However, there is a general lack of [historiographic](#) context, since these works were the results of personal interest rather than a collective professional desire to unravel the complexity of the subject. Moreover, some of these first studies (often doctoral research) were undertaken outside Spain. Examples include the analysis of [Alfonso XIII, King of Spain \(1886-1941\)](#) and his humanitarian efforts and mediating work during the war,^[1] as well as texts that refer to Spanish bilateral relations with the belligerent countries.^[2] In recent years, these have become the focus of new and more ambitious analysis.^[3] We can now add original work that deals with Spanish neutrality from other perspectives including the [intelligence services](#),^[4] the regional periphery,^[5] and Spanish relations with the belligerent powers examined through an internationalist lens.^[6] The synthesis of these gives us a broader vision of Spanish neutrality.^[7]

Public opinion towards war, including various views about Spanish neutrality, has also been the subject of studies that began in the 1970s.^[8] Subsequent historiography, mainly from outside Spain, has concerned itself with the [propaganda](#) that [Germany](#), [France](#), the [United States](#) and [Great Britain](#) imposed on in the country.^[9] The division of public opinion and the internal conflict were aggravated by the impact that the war had in Spain. About that impact, we have also some old and more recent studies from economic,^[10] social and political perspectives.^[11] This article aims to summarize some of the key ideas of those studies, using new primary and secondary sources, and to explain the reasons for Spain's neutrality; the factors and actors that led to Spain's remaining neutral; and the great impact of the war in Spain into the immediate post-war period.

Spain's Neutrality during the Great War

The greater understanding of Spanish foreign policy during the First World War has impacted on its European context, as we can appreciate its neutrality as a common experience in other continental states.^[12] This is the case of several democracies in central and northern Europe, such as [Switzerland](#), [the Netherlands](#), [Denmark](#), [Sweden](#), and [Norway](#). These countries were subject to pressure from the Entente – the Allies – (particularly from Great Britain), and from neighbouring Germany, but remained [neutral](#) until the end of the war. Southern European states such as [Romania](#), [Greece](#), [Italy](#), Spain, and [Portugal](#) initially declared neutrality, but most of them ended up fighting. This was because they tried to achieve political objectives, which corresponded to their supposed national interests, often without gaining the general support of their populations, in what were unrepresentative regimes. These southern European states therefore combined a sense of marginality in the international sphere with an opportunism in pushing for their interests. Some of these states had territorial motivations (Italy, Greece and Romania for example, leaned to [irredentism](#)), or political motivations (the recently established Portuguese Republic, for instance, tried to gain international acceptance while dealing with internal fragility as well as external threat). The exception was Spain, which had the initial sense of marginality common to the southern states but

lacked political objectives capable of overturning neutrality. This would be greatly debated but had a solid basis in Spanish weaknesses.

Before analysing Spanish neutrality and its evolution, it makes sense first to discuss some underlying factors, as they can tell us much about the political relationships that the country developed with the belligerent countries. Geography played a key role, as the Iberian Peninsula bordered France. Since Spain also had solid commercial and financial links with Great Britain it grew economically dependent on Great Britain as well as France, for both [raw materials](#) and manufactured goods. This was in part due to Spain's lack of industrialisation; its old-fashioned social structures; and its unrepresentative political regime. In addition, Spain had an old-fashioned and inefficient army, as it had been shown by its disastrous campaign in Melilla – border with Morocco – in 1909. Moreover, the army was increasingly determinant in the internal political action, because of its growing instrumentalisation and involvement in politics.^[13]

Military Resources and Neutrality

On the eve of the First World War, both the navy and army faced problems that included their inadequate organisation and difficult relations with the government and with society. These are traceable back to the Spanish-American war of 1898, during which the navy was virtually wiped out and, of the Spanish colonies, Cuba was liberated and Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines were lost to America. Although the Prussian army (which in 1870 defeated the French in the Battle of Sedan), had become a reference point and model for Spanish military reformism in the last third of the 19th century, substantial changes were not achieved. The Prussian army was formed of conscripted soldiers, but in Spain, the conscription laws of the 1870s and 1880s had created a conservative and old-fashioned army in which only the poorest, who were incapable of paying for their exemption, were called up. In Germany and other industrialised countries the arms industry invigorated the economy, as the army and navy played an important role in the market. In Spain, however, these forces were not clients: instead, they both failed to stimulate industrial development and bled the state budgets dry, while acting as an autonomous body.

The reforms undertaken at the beginning of the 20th century consolidated the situation or, at best, were reduced to good intentions, which aimed to, but generally failed to, reform the situation provoked by the disaster of 1898. The deterioration of parliamentarianism, in parallel with the rise of social and regional conflicts, led to the Law of Jurisdictions in 1906, which gave control over freedom of speech and assembly to the military, thus creating an autonomous army with governmental authority. This complicated any reforms intended to make the army more efficient, such as that undertaken in 1911 by President [José Canalejas \(1854-1912\)](#). This was the Spanish version of obligatory military service, although in times of peace it could be substituted by paying quotas to the state.

After the 1898 disaster, colonial conflict in Morocco became the main focus of military activity and

spending: of the 140,000 soldiers the army had on the eve of the First World War, 76,000 were in Morocco. Meanwhile, what was left of the navy after 1898, had to wait until 1908 to gain approval for a programme of shipbuilding that, although slow, slightly improved the situation. Thus, if we measure the strength of the state on the international scene in terms of military power, the first obvious conclusion is that the Spanish army was in no condition to participate in alliances based on mutual commitments, and was incapable of joining a European war.

Spain's lack of military resources, as well as its unfinished naval reconstruction,^[14] also put its security in the hands of the Entente, with which it had signed the Cartagena Agreements (Declaraciones or Acuerdos de Cartagena) in 1907. These agreements derived from an exchange of diplomatic notes by Spain with Great Britain and France, in which all parties agreed to maintain the territorial status quo of their respective Mediterranean and Atlantic possessions. They were to consult each other if there were any threat to the status quo, although the agreements did not specify concrete measures for safeguarding territories. Moreover, the inclusion of Spain in the defensive scheme of the Entente was reinforced by the 1912 treaty between Spain and France regarding Morocco: the two countries were now partners – albeit unequal – in such a sensitive territory for colonial policy.

Public Opinion and Internal Conflict: Making Sense of the War

Public opinion towards war, including various views about Spanish neutrality, was divided.^[15] The contenders promoted propaganda in the country, offering resources that fed and encouraged the fight over neutrality. Thus, internal conflict was underpinned by the earlier political confrontation between first, the supporters of the Bourbon Restoration (a two-party dynastic/monarchical system – *turnismo* – under which Liberal and Conservative parties were rotated, which had begun in December 1874), and second, those who hoped to reform it or bring about its downfall. This was aggravated by social and economic backwardness, and complicated by regional differences.^[16] The political conflict grew worse throughout the war, with the participation of increasing numbers of Spaniards who did not belong to the social, political, and intellectual elites. Public opinion became more polarised as the war increasingly impacted on Spain. Almost all newspapers took sides in the debate. The messianic character of the conflict and the intense propagandist activity of the belligerents in Spain led to the position it took in regard to war.

In the neutral countries, direct confrontation between the two sides took place in the field of propaganda, since each side had to advertise in order to gain the support of the undecided. During the First World War, the propaganda deployed in Spain by the belligerents was more than just a paper war; words were supplemented by images supplied by the new technical resources of the day. Employing different approaches, pragmatic propagandists, as well as opportunists and even (frustrated) idealists, used all tools on hand. Moreover, assisted by their respective diplomatic services – journalists, politicians, intellectuals and professional publicists, they also participated. This was also a struggle marked by a clash of diverse principles and material interests, supported in this

case by vast amounts of money that crisscrossed Spain to purchase opinion, especially that expressed in the press.^[17]

The Spanish propaganda war played out on the national level, as the two groups into which Spanish opinion was divided saw it as a continuation of their own internal struggles. On the side of those who supported Germany, we find the defenders of traditional order: the aristocracy, the church and the military, supported by the right-wing parties such as the Carlists (followers of a traditionalist and legitimist political movement seeking the establishment of a separate line – descended from Carlos, Prince of Bourbon (1788-1855) – of the Bourbon dynasty on the Spanish throne) and Maurists - followers of the veteran conservative, Antonio Maura (1853-1925) - while those who supported the Allies were the defenders of political reforms, middle-class professionals and the petty bourgeoisie, supported by the liberal, left wing, republican and Catalan nationalist political sectors, the anti-clerical groups and most intellectuals.^[18] All believed that the war would have a universalising character, as the triumph of one side would lead to a strengthening of those who supported it in Spain. This was the case despite the clear differences, amounting to downright contradictions, between the values defended in Spain and those defended by the actual combatants. Two examples will serve. First, those in Spain who defended the existing political system and traditional religion would in reality have found it difficult to see their traditional views represented by the German Empire, with its federal system and Protestant *Kaiser*. Second, on the other side, the defenders of republicanism would hardly have felt comfortable supporting the British monarchy, much less the even more authoritarian Tsarist regime. The contradictions were rife and they clearly show that the struggle over the war's course was based on an internal conflict that bore little relation to international reality. This in itself can explain Spanish neutrality during the conflict, which the conservative government of Eduardo Dato (1856-1921) proclaimed from the beginning of the struggle.

The disaster of 1898 against the United States, and the military fatigue in Morocco, encouraged an attitude of rejection towards modern war in many sectors of Spanish society. Moreover, participating in war would have created an unsupportable tension for the army, the corrupt political system, the outdated economic structures, and the fragile social peace, threatening the very survival of the monarchy. With the exception of those who wanted to precipitate the monarchy's collapse and cause a regime change or revolution, most assumed that Spain was too impotent to take part in the war. Moreover, the (largely illiterate) majority in Spanish society remained indifferent, without understanding what was at stake in the war or in the ideological struggle, which some saw in it. Consequently, despite the commitments to and connections with the Entente, a weak consensus developed: but it was a consensus that accepted non-intervention. It was also one of the few consensuses which could not prevent neutrality, which tried to be strict in diplomacy, became tainted with variations and orientations when it was reflected in the press, and which was connected to internal political conflict.

Maintenance of Neutrality

Neutrality was therefore imposed as the official political line to be followed by different governments, despite – or because of – the divisive public debate and the difficulties facing the neutrality. In August 1914, President Eduardo Dato explained this to Antonio Maura, indicating that England and France could not reproach Spain because of the pacts between them relating to Morocco. Dato had no fear that the Allies would force Spain to take sides with them, as they knew that Spain lacked adequate military material and preparation. Nonetheless, after his realistic description of Spain's military power, he offered an international agenda that bore little resemblance to the realities of Spain's situation. The president wanted Spain to host the future Peace Conference, for which he claimed to have the necessary royal patronage and moral authority, and hoped thereby to bring together the opposing forces.^[19] This illusion was based on the belief, even in neutral countries, that the war would be short; the president did not understand that this was a total war, whose outcome could be little affected by traditional sources of power.

In the context of that initial belief, the Treaty of Windsor (which, in 1899, had ratified Portuguese dependence on Great Britain), and the subsequent agreements of Cartagena (which placed Spain in the defensive Anglo-French scheme), guaranteed the neutrality of the Iberian Peninsula for the Entente. This was sufficient in what was assumed would be a short war in which Spain's military resources would not be needed. In terms of Paris' or London's inability to censure Madrid, which Dato referred to, in reality, they would have had no desire to do so: what the Entente powers wanted, and pursued, was the benevolent neutrality of Spain, which suited both their commitments and its dependence. In this sense, the political services, which Dato wanted neutral Spain to perform at the beginning of the war, such as being a "pacifier" between combatants, were of little interest to the Allies, who were much more concerned with the highly important economic services that Spain could provide. Due to the unpredictable course taken by the war, the Iberian Peninsula's neutrality was not sufficient: greater Iberian commitment to the warring partners became necessary for a long war, in which it was not military but economic resources which tipped the balance. The Entente demanded a growing commitment from Spain, whose economic resources were at the service of the Allies. Moreover, Italy's entry into the war in 1915 and Portugal's in 1916 devalued any possible military contribution from Spain. To support their military interests, the Allies used coercion to obtain an interpretation of neutrality on the part of the Spanish authorities, which, at certain points of the war, went beyond benevolent neutrality. Most importantly, this was used to restrict German use of communication infrastructure and Spanish ports.^[20]

Throughout the war, different Spanish governments maintained an official, neutral position that was affected by several internal and external incidents. Although Madrid tried to escape from the conflict, the war impacted on Spain with an explosion of exports towards new markets that had been abandoned by the fighting powers, and a fall in imports. This led to rapid inflation. In turn, this permitted speculation and created a crisis in subsistence livelihood. This led to popular discontent, which was channelled through the mobilisation of the workers, and was opposed to political degeneration. The subsistence crisis led to the fall of Dato's conservative government, which had declared a neutral position based on his naive view, and was now confronted with the hard reality of

the war and its scars in Spain. After his resignation in December 1915, he was succeeded by liberal Álvaro de Figueroa, Count of Romanones (1863-1950), the leader of the other dynastic party, who had made his sympathies for the Allies (who favoured his appointment) known at the beginning of the war.

During his leadership, a more benevolent neutrality with the Entente developed, since after Italy's and Portugal's entries into the war, and that of the United States in the spring of 1917, some Francophiles, and especially Romanones, believed that Spanish neutrality was increasingly less suitable for the war's progress and Spain's interests. Moreover, Spanish shipping and therefore national commerce, suffered intensely from the effects of a major German [submarine](#) campaign mainly, but not only, in the Mediterranean and around Britain. Already in April 1916, Romanones, acting as minister of state, suggested to the American ambassador Joseph Willard (1865-1924) that the neutral countries send a joint protest against the torpedoing of their ships. However, nothing came of the suggestion, despite the secretary of state, Robert Lansing (1864-1928), responding that his department was considering it.^[21] The Germanophiles, who from the beginning of the conflict were aware that they could not expect Spain to participate on the side of Germany, then favoured strict neutrality in the face of Romanones' pro-Allies tendencies.^[22] From the beginning of the war, Germany had made vague territorial promises to Spain (Gibraltar, Tangiers, Portugal) as a reward for collaboration, and aimed to counter the Entente's influence and the maintenance of Spain's neutrality.^[23] Now, Germany had to make some concessions in respect of navigation to counter both Romanones' policy, and the negative effects that the submarine war was having on public opinion. This encouraged the French and the English to step up pressure, especially during the summer of 1916, after the German submarine *U35* visited the port of Cartagena in June and brought a personal message from Wilhelm II, German Emperor (1859-1941) to Alfonso XIII. This led to a threatening statement by the Entente towards Spain, which was obliged to publish a declaration to impede the repetition of such visits.

The German submarine war provoked many conflicts between Madrid and Berlin, since most of the German promises with respect to Spanish ships and concessions for Spanish commerce were difficult to fulfil in practice without compromising the operation. Its negative effect on opinion was counteracted by a reinforcement of German propaganda in late 1916 and early 1917, when the funds available to the German Embassy for propaganda in the press and cinematographic projections increased. The idea was to undermine the policy of Romanones, who, faced with weak support for the peace initiative undertaken by Alfonso XIII in May 1916, was finally convinced that it was naive to expect that Spain would get anything out of a negotiated peace. This was the case despite the fact that the king believed that after tensions between Washington and Berlin increased, he could carry out the role previously undertaken by President Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) as leader of the neutral countries.^[24] On 6 February 1917, when the submarine war had intensified, in an interview given by King Alfonso to ambassador Willard, Spain – like other neutral countries – rejected the cooperation that the [United States](#) proposed for ending relations with Germany.^[25] However,

Romanones began secret contacts with the Allies, instructing the Spanish ambassador in Paris, Fernando León y Castillo (1842–1918), to explore the possibility that Spain would have to obtain Tangiers, Gibraltar, and a free hand in Portugal, if it sided with the Allies. These, however, were not keen on Spanish participation and even less keen to give assurances about these territories.^[26] Thus, Romanones could offer nothing to the public, which was split over Spain's neutrality, when he believed the moment had come to send an ultimatum to Germany after the sinking of the Spanish steamship *San Fulgencio* in April 1917. This led him to confront the king, the king's ministers, and the rest of the dynastic forces, who were against the dangerous political line (close to intervention), which was backed by the socialists and republicans (the anti-dynastic groups that looked sympathetically on what was happening to the Russian monarchy, now abandoned by the Allies to the [Revolution](#)). Events in [Russia](#) reinforced the non-interventionist convictions of the Spanish political elites. As a result, Romanones was forced to resign, partly because of a German press campaign designed to overthrow him, which had been requested by General Erich Ludendorff (1865–1937) since the end of the summer of 1916.^[27]

Romanones' successors were Manuel García Prieto, Marquis of Alhucemas (1859-1938), and, once more, Dato. They tried to redirect Spanish neutrality, although they could not avoid frequent tension with Berlin over submarine action against Spanish shipping. The tension reached its climax in August 1918 when the national government, presided over by Antonio Maura, notified the Germans that from this time onwards Spanish ships that were sunk by the submarines would be replaced with German ones of similar tonnage that were taking refuge in Spanish ports.^[28] This measure was agreed upon after the first week of August, when Spain had already lost 100 sailors, and sixty ships – 20 percent of the merchant navy's tonnage. By this time, it had become clear that Germany was losing the war. The measure, however, was not similarly backed by liberal and conservative ministers in Maura's government, who, despite the German defeat tried to prevent the Spanish dynastic system from collapsing. Spain did not seize German ships, as the German response tacitly threatened Spain with a rift: this was enough to moderate the strength, which Madrid had wanted to show. Moreover, the Spanish government's secret telegraphic communications had been deciphered by the Germans, who knew of the Spanish weaknesses, despite the supposed firmness in Maura government's communication of August 1918.^[29] The tense negotiations which followed, revealed the difficulties the Spanish faced when trying to overcome this impasse. It led to an agreement in October, by which Germany gave Spain six ships to compensate for its loss of tonnage. It was made clear that there was no question of their being seized by Spain: the ships were designated by the German ambassador and could only be used in commerce with neutral countries and in permitted areas of navigation.^[30] The worst moments of this crisis were overcome in part thanks to Kaiser Wilhelm's conciliatory attitude: he was united by ties of monarchical solidarity with Alfonso XIII, who in turn was determined to maintain neutrality, which he associated with the very survival of the throne.

Alfonso XIII and the First World War: Negotiation of Neutrality?

The foreign policy of Alfonso XIII was a key factor in maintaining Spanish neutrality. The Spanish king intervened much more in both foreign policy and domestic policy than was normal in other European constitutional monarchies. This was in part due to the weaker constitutional character of the Spanish government. The king assumed a growing role in foreign policy, so that even before the war he was the preferred interlocutor of the foreign ambassadors to whom he revealed regenerationist foreign aspirations that included a protectorate over Portugal. He based his claims on his position and sense of royal importance. In 1913, he contemplated the possibility of compensation in return for an active commitment with the Entente. He was also open to vague German offers of support for Spanish foreign objectives if Spain were to collaborate, although he was obliged to reject them due to Spain's close relationship to and dependence on France and Great Britain.^[31]

Alfonso XIII, the son of an Austrian archduchess and husband of a British princess, let himself be courted by both sides, thus hoping to improve Spain's position as a mediator in the conflict. He therefore undertook a wide range of humanitarian actions from an office that he established in the palace. He tried to relieve the suffering of the war on both sides: his efforts enabled the exchange of prisoners and guaranteed the free passage of hospital ships, as well as other humanitarian goals.^[32] In May 1916, the king had an interview with the American ambassador, Willard. With the confirmed cooperation of the papacy, the Spanish king's influence in Austria and Germany, and the greater influence of the president of the United States in France and England, Alfonso thought the time was ripe for mediation. He thus wanted to know Wilson's opinion and intentions.^[33] The certainty that a peace proposal from the neutral countries would be rejected by the Entente, was the reason given by the United States to delay the decision not to support the royal offer until August of 1916.^[34] At the end of this year, Wilson made his famous offer of mediation, which the Allies opposed. The close relationship between the Allies and the government of Romanones explains why Spain did not support this offer of mediation, in line with the wishes of England and France.^[35] The failure of Wilson's initiative and the subsequent rupture of relations between Washington and Berlin encouraged the Spanish king in his hopes to replace the American president as future arbiter in possible peace negotiations. It was therefore essential that Spain remain neutral.^[36]

In monarchical solidarity, Alfonso XIII requested that the person in charge of Spanish business in Saint Petersburg take the necessary steps with the Bolshevik government to obtain the liberation of the Tsar's family. However, this attempt was unsuccessful. Moreover, the Spanish ambassador in Berlin took control of all the interests that had previously been under the protection of the embassies of the Allied countries. The Spanish embassy in [Brussels](#), under [Rodrigo Saavedra, Marquis of Villalobar \(1864–1926\)](#), adopted the humanitarian aims of the Spanish monarch in an attempt to limit the effects of the [German occupation of Belgium](#).^[37] This earned the king of Spain the recognition and gratitude of the belligerent powers, to whom he wished to appear as the representative of the most important neutral country, although his desire to mediate in the peace would come to nothing.

Alfonso XIII's aspirations went beyond the narrow margin for manoeuvring that the Spanish

government had in foreign policy. The question of whether Spanish neutrality was negotiable takes us to Spain's situation in relationship to the interests of the warring parties. Spain's security derived from the guarantee obtained by the 1907 Cartagena Agreements, through which Great Britain and France brought an active guarantee, although without specifying how this would be implemented. Meanwhile, Spain contributed a passive guarantee: of not interfering in overseas territories belonging to either power. This meant that if necessary, London and Paris could legitimately intervene and re-establish the status quo. However, in the context of the naval conflict during the First World War, faced with dangers to its own safety, Madrid needed an active as well as a passive, guarantee. This, however, continued to be indefinite and unspecified given the limited and abstract commitment of 1907, above all because the dangers mainly came from its partners in Cartagena. The Franco-British dependence – which went far beyond this guarantee – during the war, could hardly be affected by the German offers, which Alfonso XIII encouraged. The dangers of a change in Spain's international orientation were more real than ever in the context of war, and frustrated any negotiations in Germany's direction, as the country was implacably and inflexibly dependent on the Entente.

Spain's reduced strategic value is relevant in explaining possible negotiations about Spanish neutrality with the warring parties. At the beginning of the war, England thought that Spain and Portugal's participation on the side of the Western powers could be the necessary counterweight in the Mediterranean given Italy's membership of the Triple Alliance. However, Italy's participation alongside the Entente, beginning in May 1915, and Portugal's as of the beginning of 1916, reduced the importance of a possible Spanish entry into the war.^[38] Some Allied military commanders continued to think that in this way the **Western Front** would be materially strengthened, supplies would be guaranteed, the flow of minerals to the Allies would be assured, and submarine activity on the coasts of Spain would end.^[39] But, apart from some military advantages, there were commercial advantages. As the war continued and economic resistance became vital for the belligerents, the economic services that were increasingly demanded of Spain could be given without its involvement in the fighting. In fact, this could be done even more efficiently as a neutral country. If Spain were to be a combatant on the side of the Allies, its commerce would be further interrupted by German submarines. Thus, the British and French diplomatic representatives in Madrid indicated to American ambassador, Willard, that the continued exportation of iron ore and other essential goods was much more important than forcing Spain to break diplomatic relations with Germany, as was looking increasingly likely, at the end of the war.^[40] Willard himself informally told the Ministry of State that in his opinion the United States did not wish to see Spain involved in the war.^[41] When the minister sounded him out on the position of his country if Spain were to enter the conflict, the answer from Washington was immediate though laconic: the American government would not exercise any influence on Spain's actions, but if the latter decided to enter the war against Germany, the United States would support it in all practical ways. Neither Washington, nor Paris, nor London – which were also sounded out – seemed anxious to have Spain as an ally in the war, as they would gain little by it, especially as victory was in sight.^[42] The war ended a few weeks later.

Economic Impact, Social Mobilisation, and Political Crisis

The war greatly impacted the economic situation in Spain, producing sudden and unexpected economic growth. Spain took advantage of its neutral position to eliminate foreign intervention in its markets and to take over new markets that had been abandoned by the warring countries. The belligerents were in fact the main markets for Spanish exports, which were now essential for the war economies. The volume and the price of exports, therefore, increased significantly. Along with the drastic reduction in imports (also due to the war demands of the former suppliers), this produced a previously unseen balance of payments, which resulted in extraordinary profits. These profits were concentrated, however, in the hands of a few social groups in specific areas, as exterior demands produced an enormous expansion in Spanish industry, which was situated mainly in the north and northeast of the country. In contrast, the more heavily agricultural regions in the centre, south, and most of the Levante suffered a period of profound economic crisis, based to a large extent on the shifting economic demands for exports by the new needs of the war.^[43]

The decrease in imports, the explosion in external demand, and the increasing circulation of money provoked rapid inflation during a time of increasing scarcity of commodities. The situation was exacerbated by the collapse of the inefficient Spanish transport network. To all this was added the flourishing of contraband and speculation, which exacerbated the problem of scarcity, leading the greater part of the population to have insufficient food, while a minority gained enormous profits from the war. There was an increase in migration from the country to the cities, but even in urban centres conditions were difficult during these years. During this period, there was also a general drive to emigration overseas, following the traditional route towards America.

The growing scarcity and worsening conditions manifested themselves in the so-called “crises of subsistence”. The government proved inefficient and incapable of helping its citizens – in part because certain influential groups were benefiting greatly. This caused popular discontent, which soon crystallised as rebellions against hunger. As the war continued and the problems of supply increased, the public began to mobilise. Additionally, the public was ideologically polarised, due to internal political conflict and the division of public opinion about the war. The subsistence crisis caused the fall of the government of the conservative Dato in December 1915. The new cabinet of the liberal Romanones, had to face a historic alliance – from July 1916 – of the two main organisations of the still-immature workers’ movement in Spain: the Socialist *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT) and the anarchist-syndicalist *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT), which demanded an efficient political response to combat the unchecked rise in the cost of living and the scarcity of foodstuffs. The situation worsened in February 1917, when Germany intensified the submarine war. This increased the difficulties of supply in Spain, and the pro-Allied policy of Romanones. Now the public was more ideologically polarised, with a hardening in the position of the workers’ organisation, which from spring 1917 threatened an indefinite general strike of a revolutionary nature.

The political system of the Bourbon Restoration encountered new opposition from both outside and

within. In addition to the workers' movement, the Catalan bourgeoisie and the army also began to rebel against the regime. They introduced new problems, both regional and military, in a political system that was corrupt and decadent, and which showed its weaknesses and limitations when faced with the challenges from the war. The Catalan bourgeoisie, represented politically by the Regionalist League, tried to enforce changes in the system necessary to enable its economic strength to be recognised in political terms.^[44] Army officials and state functionaries suffered particularly from inflation, as their salaries had been frozen since 1914. In addition, in 1916, the military hierarchy had atrophied to the point where promotion for seniority in the infantry was deliberately hindered in the garrisons on the Spanish mainland. Therefore, the officials of the Barcelona infantry regiments formed groups, the so-called *Juntas de Defensa*, which extended throughout Spain from the middle of that year. Incited by merit promotions awarded in the war in Morocco, which they believed would damage their already grim-looking professional prospects, the *Juntas* demanded economic and professional improvements that included a system of promotion based strictly on seniority.^[45]

In the context of workers' radicalisation, bourgeois activism, and military discontent, it was clear that the Spanish political elite would not accept the dangerous warmongering policy of Romanones. This became even clearer after the revolution in Russia and the fall of the Tsar, in March 1917. The subsequent ideological mobilisation of the masses extended like a trail of gunpowder and threatened to ignite the whole continent. This was a warning about the dangers that greater involvement in the war would have for the Spanish regime, which was simultaneously handling new internal threats that provoked a national crisis in 1917.^[46] The first event in this crisis came from the military barracks, when the new government of García Prieto, Romanones' successor, ordered the dissolution of the *Juntas de Defensa*. Their leaders refused, and were arrested. Immediately, a new and provisional *Junta Central* was created, and on 1 June 1917, the officials presented an ultimatum demanding the release of their leaders. This marked the return of the army to the political scene and the subjection of the government to military demands. García Prieto's government resigned within two months of being formed, and Alfonso XIII once more asked Dato to form a government in accordance with the two-party system. The king's decision was unsatisfactory to almost all the political parties, from the conservatives of Antonio Maura to the socialists and the Catalan regionalists of the League. It was also badly received by the public, at a time when, with the Russian Revolution, the United States' entry into the war and the crisis of the monarchy in Greece, some people believed the advancement of democracy to be unstoppable, and predicted the end of the Spanish dynastic regime. There was also the threat of a possible alliance – however tactical and provisional – between the army, the bourgeoisie, and the proletariat.

The Regionalist League took the initiative and on 17 July called an assembly of parliamentarians in Barcelona, in which a profound constitutional reform was discussed, supported by republicans and socialists. However, the Catalan bourgeoisie, which was socially conservative, proposed a political change that would end the traditional monopoly of power precisely in order to prevent a social revolution. The coalition of forces was contrary to both the two-party system and the political

corruption, and could not count on the support of the *Juntas de Defensa*. A lack of coordination between the forces of the opposition worked in favour of the government. The latter expected that a radicalisation of the workers' movement in the form of an indefinite general strike – which had been threatened since March – would destroy all chances of a common front by separating the conservative Catalan bourgeoisie from the workers, who would be repressed by the army.^[47]

When the revolutionary general strike occurred in August 1917, the Spanish workers' movement faced its greatest challenge so far. It launched a revolutionary offensive, which failed to extend beyond a rebellion in some cities, and was brutally repressed by the army, by now the guarantor of public order.^[48] The Catalan bourgeoisie had been waiting, but after crushing the revolutionary movement, it continued with its political campaign against the system, which now appeared safeguarded – but also controlled – by the army. The *Juntas de Defensa* found new motives for hostility to Dato's government and gave it the final blow on the night of 26 October 1917, when a message signed by all the sections of the army gave the king seventy-two hours to name a new cabinet "more in accordance with the wishes of the nation".

For the second time that year, the army had forced a change of government. This put an end to the peaceful, alternating power of the dynastic parties, which had been the basis of the political system since 1875. The new government – led once more by García Prieto – was a coalition. A similar coalition was formed in March 1918, led by Antonio Maura, but also included Dato, Romanones, García Prieto and the leader of the Regionalist League, Francesc Cambó (1876–1947). The Catalan bourgeoisie had managed to break the traditional monopoly of power, confirming the beginning of the end of the political system. Although the king had been able to maintain the monarchical regime, the collapse of Maura's cabinet in November 1918, coinciding with the end of the war, was evidence of the crisis overwhelming the liberal monarchy.

The Immediate Post-war Period

Once the war was over, Spain hoped to benefit from its neutrality. However, the four years of war had ended in peace between victors and vanquished, with few real opportunities for [pacifists](#) or neutral countries, although the humanitarian actions instigated by Alfonso XIII and carried out by Spanish diplomats in Europe deserved recognition. In order for Spain to obtain some benefit in the post-war international order, it was essential to be close to the winners. Thus, with the triumph of the Allies, Romanones' well-known support of their cause made him the most suitable liberal leader to represent Spain on the international stage. As early as 9 November 1918, he took control of the Ministry of State in García Prieto's new liberal coalition government. On 5 December of that year, he formed a cabinet in which he retained this portfolio in addition to the presidency. After the declaration of the Congress of Deputies in favour of Spanish participation in the future League of Nations, Romanones went to Paris with the – frustrated – objective that Spain should participate in some way in the [Peace Conference](#). He had interviews with Woodrow Wilson and the French President, Raymond Poincaré (1860–1934), as well as with politicians and diplomats from other countries. In

these conversations, Romanones began diplomatic moves for Spain's participation in the [League of Nations](#). He glimpsed the possibilities of the country's integration as a neutral European power, the result of its mediating role during the war and the services given to the Allies.

The pact of the League of Nations initially designated the representatives of [Belgium](#), [Brazil](#), Spain, and Greece as members of the Council, until the first elections were held. However, from the beginning, the monarchical policy in the League was designed to achieve a permanent place on the Council for Spain, thus trying to sanction its recognition as a European power. Spain intended to have greater weight when it came to discussing, in Geneva, questions that were important to national interests. Obtaining a permanent seat was the goal of a long diplomatic battle, seen as a point of prestige for the Spanish. However, Spain failed to gain a permanent seat.^[49] Its spectacular economic development during the war had not served to consolidate its industrial infrastructure, nor, as we have seen, had it benefited society in general. Moreover, the economic growth disappeared as soon as the war ended, so that the post-war period was marked by recession. Also in the post-war period, social agitation intensified against the regime that was incapable of dealing with the new awareness and political mobilisation that was created during the war and strengthened by the Allied victory and the Bolshevik triumph.

Moreover, since the war, the military had actively intervened to mediate or to directly veto any government, thus increasing political instability, with the dynastic parties increasingly divided into rival factions. It was in this context that the king, the army, and the industrial bourgeoisie supported an authoritarian solution in the form of General [Miguel Primo de Rivera \(1870–1930\)](#). On 13 September 1923 the general organised a coup d'état, which suppressed constitutional guarantees and what remained of the liberal and parliamentary monarchy.

Conclusion

Spain's international position during the war was determined by its geography; its trade relations; internal weakness and conflict; and its military resources, all of which can help us to understand the reasons for its neutrality. Additionally, the mediating role of one Spanish actor, Alfonso XIII, was essential for maintaining neutrality throughout the war. After analysing the negotiations about Spanish neutrality with and between the warring parties, we can conclude that however much the Germans encouraged illusions of a more active foreign regeneration for Spain, its neutrality was controlled by London and Paris. The country had limited room for manoeuvre in undertakings that were counter to the traditional Spanish international orientation, and even in undertakings that followed its traditional orientation but would break neutrality, as is clearly revealed by the failed breakaway attempt by Romanones in April 1917.

However, the war greatly impacted on the economic, social and political situation in Spain. The division of public opinion reflected the internal conflict, that was aggravated by social and economic backwardness. The war thus exacerbated the economic inequality and social differences that were linked to regional problems. Both the defenders and opponents of the political status quo had

numerous new propaganda resources at their disposal in the midst of a civil confrontation of words, ideas, and principles. These magnified the social and political unrest. The result of this previously unseen social and ideological mobilisation was to be the final crisis of Spain's political system.

Javier Ponce, Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

Section Editor: [Marc Frey](#)

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