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In his recent article, Scott Ramsay provides what he contends to be a necessary corrective to a received wisdom about a well-trodden topic. The topic is Britain's policy toward Spain during that country's civil war, the alleged conventional wisdom being that London's policy of non-intervention was a symptom of British officialdom's anti-Communism. Ramsay argues that there were other, more pressing motivations for non-intervention than ideological dogma, chief amongst them being the broader British diplomatic strategy of appeasement. Thus non-intervention is presented as a pragmatic policy that was pursued relatively consistently for the duration of the Spanish conflict, driven by British self-interest in the wider context of the fraught strategic and diplomatic climate of the late 1930s. Ramsay is critical of existing studies, and the work of Enrique Moradiellos in particular, for allegedly overstating the role of ideology in framing Britain's position vis-à-vis both the Spanish Republic and General Francisco Franco's rebels.¹

According to Ramsay, the existing scholarship has too often characterized London's response to the Spanish conflict as 'malevolent neutrality,' in which British leaders projected a veneer of impartiality whilst hoping that Franco would prevail. By foregrounding appeasement strategy as the driver of Britain's Spanish policy, Ramsay instead concludes that London's position was one of "benevolent neutrality" (606). In short, the British were simply hedging their bets, avoiding favouring one side or the other with a view to ensuring in any subsequent European war the 'benevolent neutrality' of whichever side should emerge victorious in Spain. Ramsay insists that the existing literature "has overwhelmingly argued that neutrality was adopted because of pro-rebel sympathies and fears that a victory for the Republican Government would result in a Communist regime on the Iberian Peninsula" (605). As evidence, he provides several footnotes listing prominent contributions to the scholarship that stress, albeit to differing extents, the 'malevolent neutrality' thesis (or at least emphasizing the 'perfidy' of British policy).² The persuasiveness of Ramsay's article therefore rests on his ability to

¹ Examples of Moradiellos' contributions include *La perfida de Albión: el gobierno británico y la guerra civil Española* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1996), "British Political Strategy on the face of the Military Rising of 1936 in Spain," *Contemporary European History* 1:2 (1992), 123-137, "The Origins of British Non-Intervention in the Spanish Civil War: Anglo-Spanish Relations in Early 1936," *European History Quarterly* 21:3 (1991): 339-364, and *Neutralidad benévola: El Gobierno británico y la insurrección militar española de 1936* (Oviedo: Pentalfa, 1990).

² Ramsay cites, amongst others, Jill Edwards, *The British Government & The Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1979), Douglas Little, *Malevolent Neutrality: The United States, Great Britain and the Origins of the Spanish Civil War* (London: Cornell University Press, 1985), Moradiellos, *La perfidia de Albión*, Glyn Stone, "Britain, France and the Spanish Problem," in Dick Richardson and Glyn Stone, eds., *Decisions and Diplomacy: Essays in Twentieth Century International History* (London: Routledge, 1994), 96-120, and Angel Viñas, *La Soledad de la Republica: El abandono de las democracias y el viraje hacia la Unión Soviética* (Barcelona: Critica, 2006).

demonstrate how the existing scholarship has unjustly positioned ideological aversion to Communism as the chief driver of non-intervention. This, in turn, depends on Ramsay's ability to portray non-intervention as a strictly neutral, pragmatic and bipartisan approach that was motivated by the necessities of broader military, strategic and diplomatic considerations, most notably the policy of appeasement.

There is nothing particularly novel in the contention that the two policies – non-intervention in Spain and appeasement elsewhere in Europe – were inextricably linked. Ramsay actually acknowledges this, noting how Moradiellos, amongst others, accepts that appeasement considerations affected Britain's Spanish policy, especially from 1938. Ramsay goes still further, claiming that Britain's approach to the Civil War was, from the start, conditioned by "the wider policy of general appeasement" rather than an ideological "attempt to thwart the spread of communism" (606). Nonetheless, Ramsay's article itself focuses, as he notes, on "the last six months of the conflict in Spain" (606). By this late stage of the Spanish Civil War, even those scholars who emphasize the ideological underpinnings of Britain's Spanish policy agree that wider appeasement considerations had taken precedence. For Ramsay's argument to be genuinely compelling and innovative, he needed to demonstrate how appeasement considerations were central to British policy prior to 1938 rather than to the less contentious period after Munich.

Ramsay does provide some evidence that earlier manifestations of the appeasement of Franco were representative of a longstanding and consistent British desire to avoid antagonizing either side. There is also, to be sure, some merit in contending that previous studies tend to accentuate London's aversion to Communism and sympathy for Franco, which was suggestive of a desire see the Republic fall. Ramsay's article does provide, therefore, an interesting re-articulation of Britain's Spanish policy as pragmatic and bipartisan, projecting non-intervention as a genuine indicator of neutrality rather than a smokescreen for supporting Franco. By doing so, however, Ramsay's article is effectively echoing (uncritically) the legitimizing rhetoric used at the time, and thus overlooks how non-intervention was *never* entirely neutral. Non-intervention *was* flagrantly partisan, legitimizing Franco's rebels by affording them equality of status with the legitimate, legal and recognized government of the Republic. Furthermore, with the exception of the 1937 Nyon Conference, British policy towards Spain consistently went beyond 'neutrality,' and invariably favoured the nationalists.

Of course, London's strategy might have tacitly backed Franco for reasons of strategic expediency rather than ideological sympathy. Yet, even if this were the case, there was nothing neutral about appeasement itself. Appeasement was motivated by several interconnected factors (imperial overstretch, financial and military weaknesses, an anti-war public opinion, and so on), but it cannot be divorced entirely from ideology. A Conservative-dominated National Government clearly had more sympathy with Franco than it had with the Republic, a position which was echoed more broadly across the foreign policymaking apparatus. An institutional aversion to leftist ideology cannot be denied; as Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin instructed Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden in July 1936, "On no account, French or other, must he bring us into the fight on the side of the Russians."³ Though clearly fearful of the strategic repercussions of intervention – not least the risk of allowing the Spanish conflict to escalate into a Europe-wide war – an ideological hostility to Soviet ideology heavily informed Baldwin's stance.

In reality, both strategic considerations and ideological proclivities affected Britain's position on the Spanish war, and Ramsay's bid to separate the two is unconvincing, while also exacerbating a false dichotomy. He provides ample evidence of how policymakers explained non-intervention in ways that indicated the centrality of appeasement, but this is hardly surprising given the sources used. This is very much a traditional piece of diplomatic history, using familiar British sources emanating almost exclusively from the National Archives (predominantly FO and CAB files). Ramsay handles the sources well, marshalling the evidence with a commendable sureness of touch and confidence. But the formal language that is typical of such sources encourages a more bureaucratic and dispassionate narrative to emerge, especially if one fails to acknowledge

³ Cited in M. D. Gallagher, "Léon Blum and the Spanish Civil War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 6:3 (1971): 56-64.

what James Joll, many years ago labelled the “unspoken assumptions.”⁴ Ramsay’s article should have been more attentive to the ‘social universe’ of the policymakers, recreating their particular ‘mental maps’ which would surely have been more affected by ideology and emotion than he allows.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with an old-fashioned diplomatic history, but the argument that Ramsay is forwarding – by suggesting that ideological antipathies and prejudices have been overstated – really should have engaged with some of the more far-reaching approaches that have shaped international history for several decades, certainly since the ‘cultural turn.’ International history is currently undergoing an ‘emotional turn,’ encouraging scholars to attend to factors (including ideological proclivities) that have an impact on the decision-making process even if this impact is rarely evoked or acknowledged explicitly.⁵ In this case, as Ramsay acknowledges, Chamberlain’s “personal feelings” can be gleaned via his private letters (609). Ramsay extrapolates (not unfairly) choice quotation from these letters to evidence Chamberlain’s aversion to war and his determination to appease Germany and Italy, detailing how these convictions shaped his approach to the Spanish war. In so doing, he makes a compelling case that Chamberlain was thinking pragmatically and objectively, but other quotes from the same letters can be used to portray Chamberlain as being driven by a virulent and myopic aversion to Communism. In reality, Chamberlain’s policy was affected by *all* of these factors, and ignoring or simply underplaying one at the expense of others is unhelpful.

To conclude, it is worth revisiting Ramsay’s criticism of the existing literature on Britain’s policy during the Spanish Civil War. “The evidence,” he write, “of a link between a more general fear of the spread of communism and a fear of a communist regime in Spain, and thus its influence on British policy, however, is somewhat limited” (605). There may be some merit in this contention, and Ramsay’s article does show the value of restoring some agency to appeasement when considering the rationale for pursuing non-intervention. The problem is that the evidence he presents is similarly ‘limited.’ In short, appeasement itself, as a strategy, was ideologically motivated, and it is simply impossible to understand British appeasement without giving due consideration to the ideological aversion of the British establishment to Communism. Recognizing the fundamental interconnectedness of these factors, rather than trying to position one as being ‘more important’ than any other, is surely a more beneficial course for historians to chart.

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⁴ James Joll, *The Unspoken Assumptions*, an inaugural lecture delivered on 25 April 1968 at the London School of Economics and Political Science (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968).

⁵ See, for example, Peter N. Stearns, “Emotion and Change: Where History Comes In,” in Yohan Arrifin, Jean-Marc Coicaud and Vesselin Popovski, eds., *Emotions in International Politics: Beyond Mainstream International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).