



General Franco and Adolf Hitler in Hendaye in 1940.

The myth of cagey Franco

The dictator did not astutely convince Hitler that Spain ought to stay out of World War II. It was the Führer who believed that Spanish help might prove a liability

LUDGER MEES

October 23 marked the 70th anniversary of the famous meeting at Hendaye between Hitler and Franco, the only occasion when they met, and when the Spanish fascist could express his gratitude for massive German aid in the 1936-39 Civil War that had brought him to power. The summit meeting included a dinner and lasted nine hours; the only result was a secret protocol by which Spain agreed to enter the war provided she received "the necessary military aid."

In return, Germany was to provide foodstuffs and raw materials, help Spain win back Gibraltar from the British, and cede to Spain some undetermined French colonial territories in Africa.

A few years later, when Hitler had lost the war, Franco's hagiographers began weaving the legend of Hendaye, which is fundamental to the later Franco myth. According to the legend, it was Franco's innate astuteness that enabled him to resist the Führer's pressure for Spain to enter on the German side. The prudent *Caudillo* managed to sidestep the Nazi leader's demand, thus saving his already war-torn and impoverished country from the catastrophe of a new commitment to an even greater conflict.

This legend has enjoyed considerable currency. Even today, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the idea that the cagey Franco kept Spain out of the war is more or less vox populi. No small part of this currency has been due to

the Western governments who, later on in the Cold War era, found the legend convenient to help justify their welcoming the Franco regime as an anti-communist ally, rather than sweeping away this obsolete vestige of the fascist period.

However, we now have a better idea of just what happened before, in and after the Hendaye meeting, though many German records were lost in the war. What we find has little to do with the legend.

Franco's foreign minister at the time was Ramón Serrano Súñer, his brother-in-law, a vehe-

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ment fascist and pro-German, known for his rudeness to British diplomats. But his correspondence with Von Ribbentrop, his German counterpart as foreign minister, does not confirm his image as a fervent advocate of Spanish military commitment to Germany, in contrast to Franco's caution. It appears that in their meetings in Berlin, Von Ribbentrop treated Serrano with disdain. He did not understand why the Spaniard refused to cede one of the Canary islands for the use of the German navy, when Franco owed his Civ-

il War victory to Nazi military support.

The Spaniard's pride was offended by the brusque demand for cession of Spanish territory. But the messages Serrano received from Franco were positive about the idea, trusting to the goodwill of Hitler, and attributing the problems to the personality of Ribbentrop. In any case, the experience of seeing Spain treated as a satellite rather than a potential ally went far to temper Serrano's Germanophilia and his enthusiasm for the war.

Before Hendaye, Hitler had already concluded that a Spanish entry in the war might be a handicap to the Axis. He had seen the categorical Wehrmacht reports saying that Franco had nothing like an operative, effective army, and that long and costly rearmament would be required. Meanwhile, the bombing campaign against Britain was not producing the desired effect, and he saw that the destruction of his only remaining enemy was going to take more time than he had planned.

To this end, and most decisively, Hitler needed to build a broad entente in which Vichy France would play a leading role, to cover the African flank. And Marshal Pétain was anxious to show that Hitler's confidence in him and his regime was justified. In September a British attempt to occupy Dakar, aided by De Gaulle's Free French, was repelled by Vichy troops. Hitler, then, believed that if he yielded to Franco's demands, publicly promising to pay him for his entry in the war with a postwar cession of hitherto French territory in Africa,

this would cause a massive desertion of French colonial troops, and the consequent advance of the British. Mussolini shared this view entirely.

In Hendaye there was, then, no direct pressure exerted on Franco to enter the war on the side of Germany. Hitler considered the trip more in the sense of a visit of exploration, the objective being to mediate between the different interests being pushed by his various allies in the anti-British camp.

His message was clear: everything that stands in the way of the conclusion and implementa-

Giving in to Franco's demands in North Africa would have upset Vichy France

Spain stayed out of the war simply because Franco got lucky

tion of this entente under the hegemony of Germany undermines the war effort and delays the final victory. Hence, too, the Führer's tremendous anger as he emerged from his meeting with Franco. Famously, he told Mussolini that he would rather have three teeth pulled than have to spend another nine hours with Franco — a comment which has tended to help perpetuate the myth of the Spanish leader's cunning. How could this nobody, an unknown general who owed his position to Hitler, insist on territorial demands

in the knowledge that, if complied with, they would necessarily result in a breakdown of the alliance with Vichy, thus helping the enemy?

The historian Paul Preston is entirely right when he states that, if Spain under Franco did not enter the war, it was not as a result of any brilliant strategy to avoid it. Spain stayed out of the war simply because Franco got lucky. Lucky because in September and October of 1940 Hitler, still at the height of his power but worried because Britain was holding out, was convinced that Pétain had much more to offer him than Franco.

It is not possible to know for sure nowadays, but it is not an unreasonable hypothesis, that if the British attack on Dakar had turned out to be a success and if, due to this success, Pétain had never been able to show his influence and boost his shares in the stock market of Nazi power, Hitler might have been more receptive to the Caudillo's territorial demands. Thus, having satisfied his dream of an enlarged African empire (a pet dream, his army career having begun in the colonial war in Morocco), Franco would have won the booty he wanted as a reward for Spain's entry in the war.

However, luck kept him out of the war, limiting Spain's military role to the sending of 50,000 Spanish soldiers of the Blue Division to fight on the Russian front (it was specified that they were not to be used against the Western allies), wearing the uniform of the Wehrmacht.

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