

## Ralph Fox's Exposure of Portuguese Military Support for Spanish Nationalism and British Wilful Ignorance

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Ralph Fox's conviction about the new danger of Fascism was so strong it led him to enemy territory to report on the nature and behaviour of the Portuguese New State, including its support for the Spanish military coup. The resultant book, *Portugal Now*, is one of various examples of how easy it was to gain information on Portuguese military assistance for the Spanish Fascists from the beginning of the civil war.

Fox's discoveries raise two main questions for modern readers: how valid the claims of Portuguese violations were, and how much British officials knew and chose to know about these transgressions. Information about military supplies to the Fascists is now quite copious, through the published histories of the war and also from contiguous studies, for example of the aeronautics industry. Britain's failure to act in defence of international law has received much less detailed attention, but the publication of government and government-related documents is very revealing, notably so in the seventeenth volume of *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, which, together with archive materials, makes available coevally secret correspondence between Foreign Office staff. By comparing reports like Fox's with British government documents one can see, in the attitude of officials in Westminster and Lisbon, an obstinate refusal to acknowledge what were blatant

violations. These politicians and diplomats were, through evasion and political bias, effectively complicit in illegitimate military aid for a coup against a democratic government.

In the autumn of 1936 Fox, a Communist, sailed in the guise of a tourist to Lisbon, (Fox 1937, 12-20) the centre of Antonio Salazar's government, in part to expose the extent to which Portugal and Germany were assisting the reactionary forces' military campaign in the Spanish Civil War, then in contravention of an international agreement.<sup>1</sup> The situation on the continent that year was marked by a dichotomy, which was why many British Conservatives could view Fascism favourably, and also why Communists like Ralph Fox were deeply concerned about the threat to the Spanish Republican government. To the extent that the Left and Right were united, if sometimes only in sympathy, it was by a shared fear: in turn of Fascism and of Communism.

While any sympathy felt between Conservatives, Monarchists and Fascists was largely impromptu, on the Left there was an attempt at organised unity. It began with the Communist Party and was known as the United Front and the Popular Front. The former was intended to establish links with those political groups most similar to the Communists and to concentrate on national rather than international concerns. (Blaazer 2002, 173) Its international homologue, the Popular Front, is said to have begun on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1935 when Georgi Dimitrov, Secretary General of the Comintern, spoke to the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International.<sup>2</sup> Dimitrov told delegates that fighting the ascendancy of Fascism in Europe

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- 1 The Non-Intervention Agreement prohibited signatories from the export of military equipment to either side in the Spanish Civil War, although it was in contravention of international law (democratic governments had the right to foreign military support). It was applicable from August 1936. However, it was ignored by Germany, Italy and Portugal from the beginning and, as a result, the Soviet Union treated it as irrelevant by supplying material and personnel from October 1936. (Salvadó 2005, 71-72) Theoretically, the agreement was upheld by the Non-Intervention Committee, which met in London and was attended by a representative of each participating country, usually the local ambassador, but the Spanish government was excluded. When accusations were made, the country accused was asked to respond in writing, after which the matter was considered settled. (Thomas 2003, 382-3)
  - 2 The Communist International was formed in 1919 with the intention of co-ordinating and encouraging Communism in other countries, with the ultimate aim, at least initially, of a world revolution. (Ransome 1919, <https://www.marxists.org/history/archive/ransome/works/1919-russia/ch27.htm>)

should be their priority, and for this confrontation they would need to join with other political parties:

The establishment of unity of action by all sections of the working class, irrespective of the party or organization to which they belong, is necessary (...). The Communist International *puts no conditions for unity of action except one, and at that an elementary condition acceptable to all workers, viz., that the unity of action be directed against fascism, against the offensive of capital, against the threat of war, against the class enemy.* [Author's italics] (Simkin)<sup>3</sup>

The clearest manifestation of the Popular Front strategy was in the Spanish Civil War. At the start of the war, instructions sent from Moscow emphasised the need for a "joint action of all forces", and with the concern that the Spanish government "is going to vacillate", the unwelcome option of the Communists joining the government (the Russians still hoped for British and French assistance) might have been necessary, "to save the Spanish people with the participation of all parties of the Popular Front, Communist and Socialist."<sup>4</sup> (Radosh 2001, 9) Anarchists and Trotskyites were to be treated as enemies. (3)

In terms of this Communist change of attitude, Fox's experiences and writings are exemplary, his two descriptions from France and Portugal from 1936 being conspicuously different from his previous publications. In 1920 he became a founding member of the British Communist Party (CPGB) and most of the work he produced is characterised by a view of Marxism as the uniquely apposite solution for the West's political and economic problems. He was, therefore, dismissive of the change offered by other left-wing parties, exemplified by the British Labour Party, whose policies, he wrote, would make private property more secure and, for example, on agriculture were indistinguishable from those of the Conservative Party. (1935, 142-3)

However, when he visited France in 1936 to report on the political situation (for the book *France Faces the Future*), he did not see anything

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3 <http://spartacus-educational.com/GERdimitrov.htm>

4 Document dated 20<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1936.

like a Communist revolution providing an immediate answer to their problems. In contrast to his scathing views of western economic and political systems a year earlier, Fox now hoped the French could create “a democratic and enlightened capitalism”, (1936, 76) he could see “all democratic forces” (39) unify against the right-wing threat, and so move “forward to a glorious conclusion”. (116) While Fox was not shy of revealing who he favoured – for example, he singled out the success of the French Communist Party at the elections, (62, 101 and 125) noted that French strikers’ demands had been based on “the Labour Code of the Soviet Union”, and that the workers’ new-found pride proved economic success “lies in the ownership of the means of production”<sup>5</sup> (123-24) – his acceptance of some forms of democracy, capitalism and other left-wing parties marks a considerable change in outlook.

Fox travelled to both France and Portugal in the same year to warn about the “New Europe” in which right-thinking citizens had to unify and resist Fascism. What he called “the People’s Front” in France “represents a new kind of unity”, of workers, peasants, lower ranking public officials, small shop owners, intellectuals, teachers, writers, artists, scientists and engineers, “because in the twin menace of war and Fascism he sees the end of all civilisation”. (1936, 11-12) Socialists, Communists and Radicals shared the single ambition of ensuring that together they would be even more successful in future elections. (113) The greater urgency in Spain meant the appeal transcended nationality: “a regiment of men of every country bound together only by their love of freedom and hatred of Fascism.” (1937, 35)

The two books, *France Faces the Future* and *Portugal Now*, were published by a newly formed company, Lawrence & Wishart Ltd., the result of a merger in March 1936 which was emblematic of the times, between Wishart Books, a liberal publisher, and Martin Lawrence, the official Communist Party printers in Britain. (Hobday 1989, 168-69) Douglas Garman, a director at Lawrence & Wishart, actively

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5 “But behind the right to work stands the power over capital; behind the power over capital, the appropriation of the means of production, their subjection to the associated working class”. (Marx 2003, 63)

promoted the related United Front campaign, and his letters (intercepted by MI5) show that Fox was not alone in his hopeful attitude to political alliances. When Garman wrote to Tom Wintringham, a fellow-Communist, he lamented that “the United Front business is slow work – the Left saw its work, the Right acts as brake, and is horribly timid about unity.” (26<sup>th</sup> September 1935) The next year Garman attended a meeting of the Labour Party to propose affiliation with the Communists and, though his proposal lost with the Chairman’s casting vote, he saw hope in the support of all the younger delegates and thought a speaker from the YCL (Young Communist League) would be welcome “if he spoke from the United Front point of view” (14<sup>th</sup> May 1936).

Unlike the Left in Europe, which had tentative or actual alliances, as far as European parties on the Right had an accord it was unofficial and nameless. Much of their understanding was the result of a shared *bête noire*. This meant that persuading the British government to defend Spain’s democratically elected government was impossible: most Conservative MPs hoped for a Nationalist victory in Spain, not least due to their confidence that British businesses in Iberia would be more secure with that outcome than with a triumphant left-wing. (Kitchen 2006, 353) However, there was considerable disparity about the civil war between Britain’s governing politicians and the population they were supposed to represent. An opinion poll taken in January 1937 by the British Institute of Public Opinion found that only 14% thought Franco should lead the Spanish government while the remaining 86% opposed the idea. (Buchanan 1997, 23)<sup>6</sup>

One way for Baldwin’s government to placate any possible public discontent was through the Non-Intervention Agreement, theoretically ensuring that no favouritism was shown to either side, to ensure that the Spanish Civil War only involved Spaniards and Spanish military equipment, but in practice allowing the Germans and Italians to give

6 The predominance of anti-Fascist sentiment was confirmed in later surveys. For example, in December 1938, in an imagined war between Russia and Germany 9% would have favoured Germany, while 61% preferred Russia; and in January 1939 when forced to choose between Communism and Fascism, 74% chose the former, 26% the latter. In the same survey, 73.5% felt ‘sympathies’ for the Spanish Republicans and 9% for Franco’s rebels. (Liddell 1939)

massive assistance of men and machines to Franco's effort, (Salvadó 2005, 73-74) and later obliging the Soviets to support the Republican cause in a similar manner to prevent almost instant capitulation. (78) Under the rules of the agreement, only the governments of signatories (which included Germany and Italy) could lodge complaints about breaches, but Spain was excluded. (72) Monitoring by representatives of the Non-Intervention Committee did not begin until April 1937, and even so some of the observers were German or Italian, when, naturally, shipments were made using subterfuge. (152)

Therefore, if Fox was able to describe for his fellow-countrymen how the Non-Intervention Agreement was not only a sham but effectively giving the Fascist side a significant advantage, he must have hoped to have increased the pressure on Britain's political leaders. To contribute to any popular clamour, Fox's readers would have to have believed in the veracity of his text and, if they did, may have wondered how a Communist in a Fascist country had so easily found this information while the political establishment, with a diplomatic corps in the same country, either had no idea the NIA was being violated or were content to allow it to continue.

If indeed he had a sense of urgent mission, it raises the question of how reliable his descriptions and data were. Two references in *Portugal Now* make it possible to date exactly when Fox claimed to have made his visit. The first is his allusion to an incident he wrote had occurred while he was passing through France, in which a member of the far-right *Croix de Feu* group<sup>7</sup> threw a bomb into a dance organised by local Socialists and Communists. Someone at the dance threw the bomb back, the bomber was chased, but one who caught him was shot. (10-11) Even if this reads as an over-contrived metonymy – joyful left-wing meeting of friendly youths attacked by a murderous Fascist – it is confirmed by a story in *Le Figaro* "Une bombe dans un bal populaire". The article reported that on the previous Saturday to Sunday a bomb was thrown into a dance being held in Vienne (south of Lyon),

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7 In *France Faces the Future* Fox described the *Croix de Feu* as a small Fascist organisation, led by a descendant of 1790 counter-revolutionaries. (Colonel de la Rocque, 17-18)

one of the dancers threw the bomb back out, the would-be bombers were chased unsuccessfully, and one of those chasing was killed. The newspaper is from Monday 21<sup>st</sup> September, so the event was on 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> September (1 and 3). Fox writes that he went to Portugal by sea a week later, (12) so that he would have arrived in Lisbon around the end of September or the beginning of October.<sup>8</sup> According to Fox, he spent the next five days trying to meet the man he supposed was the "head of propaganda", (21) and the following two days were a Sunday and then a national holiday for what Fox calls a revolution. (24) 5<sup>th</sup> October, which would fit very well with the timing of the bomb incident and subsequent itinerary, was on a Monday in 1936 and the holiday commemorates the day in 1910 when Portugal was declared a Republic, following an uprising.

The MI5 understanding of Fox's journey concurs with the above interpretation quite closely and, while at the start it appears to be roughly a week later than the version extrapolated from *Portugal Now*, it is evident that they missed his departure to France and were quite possibly relying on delayed communications. Fox is reported as being in Paris on 12<sup>th</sup> October, but the following day an article, "How Franco Gets Planes in Lisbon", is said to have been published in the *Daily Worker* "How Franco Gets Planes In Lisbon", the result of information gained from an eight-day stay. If the article was sent a few days before it was published, it would accord with the dates implied in the book. The next day (14<sup>th</sup> October) the security service record that the *Daily Worker* published "Lisbon Sits on a Volcano", and "The Exiles of Lisbon" was published on 17<sup>th</sup> October, the same day Fox was seen to have returned to Harwich at 6 a.m.

There were two distinct versions of the government Fox had investigated, the Salazar regime or New State (*o Estado Novo*): what the government chose to present to impress Portuguese citizens and foreigners; and those inconvenient facts which were not supposed to be noticed. An example of the former was an interview Salazar gave

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8 He boarded a Nelson liner at Boulogne (1937, 12) and, at an average of speed of 20 knots, with a short stop in Vigo, (19) the journey would have taken a few hours more than two days.

to a journalist in 1932. The journalist, António Ferro, had become Portugal's propaganda chief and the founder of the *Secretariado de Propaganda Nacional* (Secretariat of National Propaganda), which began operating on 26<sup>th</sup> October 1933. (Meneses 2009, 172-3) Fox's source for the interview was the French translation, *Salazar, Le Portugal et son Chef*, published in 1934, (Fox 1937, 46) a reminder that Fox would not have been able to understand the original in Portuguese, and of the difficulties he must have experienced communicating and gathering information while in Lisbon.

The English translation (*Salazar: Portugal and her Leader*) was not available until 1939. It had a preface written in 1935 by Austen Chamberlain, British Conservative Party leader in 1922, foreign secretary for five years in the late 1920s, and half-brother of Neville Chamberlain (British Prime-minister from 1937 to 1940). (Dutton 2004<sup>9</sup>) Austen's admiration of Portugal's dictator was shared by many from the British establishment. Unlike Neville, Austen was consistently distrustful of the German government, and he was contemptuous of their internal and foreign policy, (Dutton) but Salazar was an entirely different matter. While he would admit to similarities between Hitler, Mussolini and Salazar, that in striving "to remake the soul of a people" those same people have had their freedoms restricted, in Salazar's case nobody could doubt "the nobility of the purpose" and "the new spirit which he has introduced into the public life of this country." (Ferro 1939, 9-10) The tempered admiration was probably in part a product of positive assessments from diplomatic staff in Lisbon, exemplified in a letter from May 1929 (at the end of Chamberlain's term as foreign secretary) from the British *Chargé d'Affaires*. The diplomat was troubled by reports of Salazar having tuberculosis: if he did not recover it "would be a great tragedy" because to find his equal in Portugal "combining such ability, energy, courage and disinterested devotion to the interests of the country" would be very difficult. (Meneses 2009, 59) It is comparable to the glowing assessment Fox quotes from *The Times*, that Salazar was "one of the

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9 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32351?docPos=1>

greatest finance ministers of modern times."<sup>10</sup> (1937, 45) Salazar would not have disagreed. From the interview with Ferro, Fox quotes the Portuguese leader describing himself implicitly as "one of those rare men, morally exceptional, with a great inner discipline, a firm will and a clear intelligence." (45)

On arrival in Lisbon, Fox encountered difficulties in his attempts to discover information through official sources, who were neither hostile nor helpful, and he describes his fruitless experiences at length. (22-25) He eventually met António Eça de Queiroz, whom the Briton first calls Portugal's propaganda chief, (21) and later amends to the head of the foreign affairs section of propaganda. (23) His error in claiming that Eça de Queiroz, actually Ferro's deputy, (Meneses 2009, 231) was in charge, was presumably because Fox could not resist the idea that a son of Portugal's most famous writer of fiction was the man running the propaganda department. After talking amiably with the writer's son, a fluent English speaker, and learning nothing, it was suggested Fox questioned the head of the press department, but as he proved equally evasive, (1937, 25) the Briton looked elsewhere. According to Fox, at that time the barman of the Hotel Vitoria in central Lisbon was Spanish, and his bar had the flag of the rebels between a swastika and an Italian flag hanging behind him. It was a popular haunt with German pilots and Fox reasoned it would be productive to drink there and listen to the gossip. (28-29) What he claims to have learnt is detailed on the next few pages, and from what is now known those claims were valid.

Fox wrote that in August 1936 German ships delivered German planes and other military cargo to Lisbon harbour, (31) and it has since been revealed that two ships, the *Kamerun* and *Wigbert*, left Hamburg in mid-August, carrying planes together with various supplies to equip the planes for conflict. They were originally bound for Cadiz and Vigo but were diverted. (Leitz 1996, 19) On 21<sup>st</sup> August both ships reached Lisbon and unloaded six He-51 bi-planes, two

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10 *The Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> March 1935: "this is surely a record of which any country might be proud, and which marks Senhor Salazar as one of the greatest Finance Ministers of modern times". (*Apud* Meneses 2009, 46)

Junkers (presumably Ju-52s), 960 50kg bombs, 10,000 10 kg bombs, 150,000 rounds of ammunition, and 3,000 tonnes of fuel. (Viñas 2001, 430) Two weeks before, another ship had sailed from the same port to Lisbon with ten Junker Ju-52s, six He-51s, bombs, ammunition, anti-aircraft guns, pilots and technicians. (Salvadó 2005, 67)

I have failed to find any evidence to support Fox's unlikely claim of the Nationalists buying two Potez bombers from France, but his elaborate tales of Fokkers being sold by KLM to the insurgents, ostensibly to a phantom British firm based in Lisbon for the supposed purpose of starting a commercial service to Lisbon, (1937, 32) appear to be close to a current understanding of events. In 1936 British Airways had four Fokker planes which KLM had recently sold used to them. British Airways advertised the planes on 16<sup>th</sup> July, but when the Spanish Civil War broke out, the potential price of the aircraft increased significantly. A representative flew to Burgos with some journalists and arranged a deal with General Mola. The payment was made through an agency, James Rawe & Co., which was based in Lisbon. (Palmer)

According to Fox, four other Fokkers left England, destined for Spain, had to land in Bordeaux and were prevented from continuing by the French. A story was hatched that they were to go to Poland, but instead Polish Fascist pilots attempted to fly them to Spain. Only one arrived. (1937, 33) However, it appears that the Fokkers that were apprehended in Bordeaux were the same ones sold through agents on the pretence they were to be delivered to Lisbon. They flew from Gatwick on 28<sup>th</sup> July and stopped in Bordeaux to await confirmation that the aircraft had been paid for, but because the French authorities had information they were intended for the Nationalists, they had to return to England. (Thomas 2003, 352) Ten days later, a Polish arms dealer reached an agreement with British Airways to buy the same Fokkers, and four Polish pilots with little experience of flying such planes, made a challenging journey across France. One landed in Bordeaux, but was allowed to continue to Spain, and two of the planes eventually reached Burgos. (Palmer)

When Fox visited Lisbon, he also saw evidence of support for the Spanish rebels, most conspicuous being the German ships in

port in amongst the Portuguese fleet, (31) impossible to conceal both because of their size and the necessary length of their stay. He also came across a number of German pilots (identifiable because of their pilot's wings), (29) and Spanish representatives of the Burgos regime driving from their headquarters at the Hotel Aviz (what its new residents termed the "Agency of the Burgos Junta") (Preston 2003, 278) to the organizational centre at the Hotel Vitoria. (Fox 1937, 31) Meanwhile, the Spanish Ambassador to Portugal was forced to live alone in the embassy in a manner analogous to house arrest, armed guards preventing visitors entering or the Ambassador leaving. (76-77) All of these discoveries, bear in mind, were made in a few days by a Communist in a city under a right-wing dictatorship that he was visiting for the first time and where he did not speak the local language.

He was, of course, not alone in publicizing examples of violations of the Non-Intervention Agreement, very soon after they had taken place. In Britain alone newspapers, including *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*, frequently reported on the blatant transgression of rules against the import of arms into Spain, as well as the atrocities committed by both sides. Politicians also tried to alert the British government to what they saw as the gross injustice of a military coup with massive foreign help attempting to overthrow a democratic government which was forbidden from receiving support from overseas.

In the early stages of the war two notable efforts led by British MPs were made to expose the situation in Spain and much of their attention was on Portugal. A group representing left-wing organisations was headed by Arthur Greenwood, the deputy leader of the Labour Party, and they presented evidence at the Foreign Office four times in the first six weeks of the war. (Medlicott 1979, 73, 119, 172 and 195) On 7<sup>th</sup> August Greenwood showed Mr. Norton, a private secretary, a document with details of Portuguese support for the insurgents. (73) A few days later Greenwood wrote to Eden requesting a meeting because the British government looked acquiescent in the face of German and Italian aggression. A delegation of four – Greenwood, two trade unionists (Walter Citrine and George Middleton), and

William Gillies (the Labour Party's International Secretary) – met Eden on 19<sup>th</sup> August and argued that the present policy was harming the legitimate Spanish government. (119-120) They spoke again a week later, this time about newspaper reports of the Portuguese giving the insurgents “all manner of assistance”, including details of a delivery by a German ship (the *Kamerun*), and they insisted that, with such a situation, the NIA should be scrapped. In the official Foreign Office record of the discussion, Eden's response reads as an abject admission of failure, that one should remember Portugal's difficult position politically and geographically, and if every other country abided by the agreement, Portugal would have no option but to comply. (172-173) Finally, Greenwood handed over more reports of Portuguese transgressions on 1<sup>st</sup> September, along with claims that a conference of arms manufacturers had been blocked by Britain, and that the rebels were receiving military aid from Germany, Italy and Portugal. (195)

The Independent MP for Combined English Universities, Eleanor Rathbone, saw the danger Nazi Germany represented from its beginning and so their involvement in Spain was of great concern to her. She chaired the “Committee of Enquiry into Breaches of International Law relating to Intervention in Spain”, which heard evidence on 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> September, and 1<sup>st</sup> October (Rathbone 1936, foreword) from various witnesses who had travelled to Spain and Portugal, and the findings were published on 3<sup>rd</sup> October, (16) (when Fox was in Portugal). The report begins with a summary of what the committee had heard, especially that “extensive rebel activity is carried on openly in Portugal”. (2) Information about German ships and their cargo that docked in Lisbon during August was provided by Arthur Koestler, who, while he was in Portugal, carried a German newspaper in his pocket so he would be presumed to be a German pilot. (4-5) He reported that the Portuguese government allowed the rebels to use their territory as a base for launching attacks, that the Spanish Ambassador was imprisoned, the Hotel Aviz had become an unofficial embassy, and, though deliveries stopped for a short time after the Portuguese joined the Non-Intervention Agreement, they resumed on

September 29<sup>th</sup>. (8) Other witnesses included two viscounts, two MPs, journalist Claud Cockburn, William E. Dodd (son of the American Ambassador to Germany), Karl Otten (a German author), a German refugee, and a retired British officer and "life-long Conservative". (10-11) They produced a wealth of evidence – photographs, documents found on dead German and Italian airmen, aircraft identity numbers, an Italian parachute and an incendiary bomb. (10) They also provided a list of examples of how the Portuguese were bolstering the rebels' campaign: in August five lorries carried ammunition from Evora (in Portugal) to Spain; a Portuguese ship, the *Santa Irene*, transported military equipment to Ceuta (in Morocco); a Spanish ship, the *Pedro D'Alemquer*, unloaded military equipment in Lisbon which was taken by lorry to Galicia; 300,000 *escudos* worth of military equipment went to Spain from "La Carcarena" [*sic*] (possibly Barcarena, about ten miles from Lisbon); and on 7<sup>th</sup> September a lorry filled with explosives left Barcarena for Spain. (9)

These are only a selection of numerous instances of observations, reports and evidence presented to the committee, whose report, as it was published two days after the last witness statements, had an urgency the members must have hoped would affect their government's attitude and policies, but it made no difference. In a debate on November 30<sup>th</sup> in the House of Commons on the Spanish conflict, Anthony Eden was asked about Portugal's sympathies for and role in the insurgents' attempted coup. When Eleanor Rathbone asked him about "the known sympathies of the Portuguese government", Eden could not accept that "Portugal was especially guilty in this matter". Likewise, on the accusation that Portugal was a "conduit pipe" for military supplies to Spain, Eden claimed he had no such information and called it improbable. (*Hansards*, November 21, 1936)

A month earlier (29<sup>th</sup> October) Eden had spoken to the House of Commons about the Spanish Civil War, beginning his justification of the Non-Intervention Agreement with a chronology of events since July and responses to some criticisms of its effect. On Portugal, Eden said the British Ambassador had assured him there was "no first-hand evidence" of the Portuguese government contravening the

agreement and, anyway, Eden thought that it was very unlikely the insurgents would prefer to use Lisbon rather than those Spanish ports under their control. (*Hansards*, October 47, 1936) More generally, he claimed that, as soon as the Foreign Office had heard of accusations from the Spanish government, all British consular staff were told to investigate. However, as if to retreat from this boast, he followed it by asking his fellow MPs to bear in mind that, although there were a lot of British consular staff working in Spain, they were very busy people, especially with their responsibilities for resident British subjects. (45)

Arthur Greenwood's response marked a significant change in official Labour Party policy when he demanded an end to the Non-Intervention Agreement (naturally, some Labour members had been against it from the beginning). It was made the day after the Soviet government and the British TUC had also decided to oppose the NIA, and a few hours after Soviet tanks and personnel first entered the conflict in Spain. (Thomas 2003, 453-454)<sup>11</sup> Greenwood explained that as the policy of non-intervention had been seen to fail, "we should return to our policy of taking international law as our basis and restore to the Spanish people the rights of which they were unfairly robbed." (*Hansards*, October 59, 1936) His stance came from his understanding that "the revolt was not the spontaneous rising of a suppressed people", but was carefully planned and depended on foreign help to undermine a democratically elected government. (52)

Judging by the collated Foreign Office documents, in the first three months of the war, contrary to Eden's assertion of investigative rigour, only one request for information on foreign intervention was made to consular or other diplomatic officials. The response and the way the information was handled offer an insight into the pervasive attitude at the Foreign Office. Following an accusation made by the French Ambassador (on 23<sup>rd</sup> September) to Robert Vansittart in London, that the Italians had undertaken large-scale deliveries of military equipment to Palma, that 100 Italian personnel were now resident there,

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11 According to Tom Buchanan, key to the party's rejection of non-intervention were the speeches of two guests from Spain, Jiménez de Asúa and Isabel de Palencia, at their conference three weeks before. (*Labour* 2017, 69)

and that many Spanish civilians dressed in Italian colours, on 3<sup>rd</sup> October the British Vice-Consul in Majorca, Lieutenant-Commander Hillgarth, was asked to provide information. (Medlicott 1979, 311-312) The next day a "Captain D", on behalf of Hillgarth, sent a detailed report of Italian imports since August, which had begun with 10 aircraft, 30 officers, eight anti-aircraft guns, and he included the names of commanders. On 7<sup>th</sup> September three bombers, six other aircraft, rifles and ammunition were brought by ship together with 28 personnel. There followed details of three more deliveries in September and the observation that the Italians were openly welcomed as political and military allies. (364-365) Therefore, Italian intervention had been conspicuous for at least six weeks and was known about by British personnel stationed on the island, but nobody had reported it to the Foreign Office. Vansittart thought it best not to remind the French about their enquiry. (312)

Naturally, the Spanish government also made accusations, but for these complaints to be presented to the Non-Intervention Committee it had to be by the British and French governments. The decision not to invite a government that was at least as democratic and constitutionally valid as any other on the committee, and a lot more so than some and, of course, was the one being threatened by the coup under discussion, received almost no attention. According to the records, in the first six meetings of the NIC (9<sup>th</sup> September to 9<sup>th</sup> October) nobody questioned Spain's absence (Medlicott 1979, 231, 274, 377-95) and only once did someone at Westminster attempt to explain it in writing. In a memorandum written by a Mr. Roberts at the Foreign Office, he supposed that inviting the Spanish government to send a representative "would amount to discrimination against the insurgents who have no international status at all at present." (363) It was certainly necessary if the British and French wanted the German, Italian and Portuguese governments to be represented: the Italian Ambassador, Dino Grandi, told Vansittart that just by raising objections which had originated with their adversary meant that Britain was siding "with Soviet Russia and Communist Spain against Italy." (371)

Grandi need not have worried. The committee as formulated had very limited expectations: if it received an accusation, it would ask for an explanation from the accused and then try to “establish the facts”. (276) Remedial action or punishment were not contemplated. Of course, establishing the facts depended on all parties being honest which, in other circumstances, various members of the Foreign Office and diplomatic corps thought a rash hope. Vansittart, in particular, had little confidence in German promises or ambitions, predicting their bellicose designs in 1933. (Rose 2004<sup>12</sup>)<sup>13</sup> He wrote to Eden that the Germans’ method of negotiating – in the hope of being given a colony – showed that they could not be trusted, (Medlicott 1979, 303) and he told the French Prime-minister, Léon Blum, that their commitment to any understanding was no guarantee, because “Germans were not Englishmen”. (356) In a statement with broader implications, he warned that “we had all learnt our lesson in regard to the signature of dictators”. (270) Others were also concerned. A report by a Chiefs of Staff sub-committee (1<sup>st</sup> September) envisaged a threat to peace in Europe and the anticipated cause was Germany who, they thought, could quite possibly attack France with Italy’s support, after which Belgium’s sovereignty would not be secure. (196-203)

Therefore, it appears that the attitude in the Foreign Office was that with decisions and agreements involving the Fascist powers they considered important one had to be very wary, but this did not include the Non-Intervention Agreement. There were also double standards in their attitude to newspaper reports on Spain. As previously mentioned, Arthur Greenwood brought newspaper accounts of foreign involvement to Eden’s attention, Eleanor Rathbone’s committee heard testimony from journalists who had been to Portugal and Spain, and Foreign Office staff must have read most of the numerous articles published in British newspapers of the Left and Right, yet the

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12 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-36630>

13 On 6<sup>th</sup> May 1933 he anticipated World War Two: “The present regime in Germany will (...) loose off another European war just as soon as it feels strong enough (...) we are considering very crude people, who have very few ideas in their noddles but brute force and militarism.” (Rose 2004)

press' findings had little or no influence on government policy or attitude. This is in marked contrast to the importance, at that time, of the contents of foreign newspapers – those of the resident country – for British diplomatic and Foreign Office staff as sources of information, and, by extension, as means to guide approach and policy, as they were a regular feature of their correspondence. The following serve as examples. In the second week of the war (26<sup>th</sup> July), and so before there was a Non-Intervention Agreement, the British Ambassador in Paris, Sir George Clerk, gave an account of the French right-wing newspapers' hostility to aid for the Spanish government, while he omitted any other views, (Medlicott 1979, 19-20) a stimulus for British tergiversation. When Eden met the Italian *Chargé d'Affaires* on July 24<sup>th</sup> he hoped to include the Italians in the feeling of amity he had experienced from French and Belgium representatives, and noted that Signor Vitetti would try to ensure a favourable response in the Italian press. (18-19) Two months later (17<sup>th</sup> September), Vansittart asked the Italian Ambassador why these same newspapers were hostile to the British, and Grandi explained they had felt snubbed, for example because the King had not visited Italy in the summer. (272-273)

Soviet newspapers were also of interest and their reports were naturally often concerned with Fascist intervention. The conspicuous-sounding British Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Viscount Chilston, as early as 28<sup>th</sup> July communicated press claims of military supplies from Italy and Germany and of their warships being in Spanish waters, together with a denial of an allegation made by Franco that the Soviets were aiding the Spanish government. (Medlicott 1979, 36) Tellingly, from an article a colleague of his relayed, it can be inferred that in certain respects journalists at *Pravda* knew more about certain ministry business in London than some Foreign Office staff. On 26<sup>th</sup> September the *Chargé d'Affaires* in Moscow, Mr. D. MacKillop, wrote that *Pravda* had reported that evidence of military aid going to Spanish rebels had been handed in to the Foreign Office by a group which included MPs. On the telegram are notes by someone unnamed at the Foreign Office, that this must have referred to Eleanor Rathbone's committee, but that this

committee had "never communicated with the F.O." (332) However, their committee had not finished its investigation by 26<sup>th</sup> September (it ended on 1<sup>st</sup> October, as mentioned above). *Pravda* was obviously referring to the four visits by Arthur Greenwood and others, and the fact that the Foreign Office official did not know about them implies their information about non-intervention violation was not thought important enough to be made known at the department.

However, when those supporting the Spanish government were thought to be violating recognised codes of behaviour, British diplomatic staff were assiduous in their investigations and eager to communicate their discoveries. George Ogilvie-Forbes, Britain's *Chargé d'Affaires* in Madrid, sent a communication in two parts four weeks into the conflict (16<sup>th</sup> August), lamenting the lawless state of the south of the city, and blaming the Communists, Anarchists and extreme Socialists for vigilante justice and 7,000 murders (he did not explain how he arrived at this figure). (Medlicott 1979, 106-107) A month later (21<sup>st</sup> August) the Consul-General in Barcelona, Norman King, reported that the city and surrounding area were witness to "atrocities", with most victims murdered by "the Government militia or agents of the anarcho-syndicalists", he presumed because the victims were not of the extreme Left, and for this he believed the government shared the blame. (144) In his desire to understand the situation, King visited the morgue to examine the corpses, and his communication describes their disfigurement. (145-146)

However, the British Embassy staff in Lisbon were blind to or had no interest in violations occurring under their noses. As a reminder, Ralph Fox, several journalists and others who gave evidence to Rathbone's committee, made their discoveries despite only being in Lisbon for a few days and, in some cases, not knowing the city or being able to speak Portuguese, a measure of how obvious the transportation of weapons to Spain was. However, British diplomatic staff instead trusted Portuguese government officials to provide information. On 7<sup>th</sup> August the *Chargé d'Affaires* to Lisbon, Mr. C. E. S. Dodd, transmitted the Portuguese government's claim that Soviet ships had been unloading military supplies in Barcelona and their bombs

had been used against “the Spanish army” (i.e. the insurgents), but he made no mention of a similar cargo to Lisbon, (68-69) nor in a message he sent a week later. (96) The Ambassador, Sir Charles Wingfield, returned from leave on 19<sup>th</sup> August (117) and four weeks later wrote that he saw “no reason for thinking that breaches of agreement are taking place here”. (269) It was not until 21<sup>st</sup> October that Wingfield acknowledged that the import and delivery to Spain of supplies to the rebels from Portugal may have taken place, but claimed that since signing the NIA only non-prohibited materials, such as petrol, had been transported. (446-447)

Portugal had been persuaded to attend the Non-Intervention Committee on 24<sup>th</sup> September. (Thomas 2003, 427) In his reports before that date Wingfield said he knew of no transgressions, but afterwards admitted to the possibility pre-NIA violations may have occurred. In delaying its entrance into the agreement, Portugal had made a number of prior conditions. The most revealing of these – that they would abide by the agreement only as long as Germany, Italy, Britain, France and Russia did, and funding or the recruitment of volunteers overseas would release Portugal from any obligations (Medlicott 1979, 143) – described what was taking place, which the Portuguese government knew. Therefore, they were openly absolving themselves from complying in any way with the NIA It was tantamount to an admission of intervention.

The weeks that it had taken to convince Portugal had been used by Wingfield’s hosts to play up the prospect of a Communist threat. While their Ambassador in London was promoting non-intervention, or at least their signing the accord, the Portuguese Foreign Minister, Armindo Monteiro, spoke about Portugal’s precarious position, a theme he knew would be conveyed to London. Monteiro told Dodd in August that Spanish Prime Minister Azaña planned to attack Portugal if victorious. (Medlicott 1979, 69) Two weeks later he told Wingfield that, in order to safeguard “public order, protection of life and liberty of Portuguese citizens”, his government demanded the right to defend the country against “any subversive regime established in Spain if necessary for the defence of Western civilisation”.

(143) In September Monteiro told the British Consul in Geneva about fears of a Soviet Iberian Republic if the Spanish Left won, a concern with which the Consul was sympathetic. (297)

The idea of a Communist Iberia probably originated with the Portuguese Commerce Minister, in letters he wrote to Salazar in July to generate support for the Spanish Nationalists, (Meneses 2009, 193) not in Madrid or Moscow, but, however spurious, it seems to have helped bring British officials closer to the Portuguese government's way of thinking. As well as the Consul, Wingfield, when explaining (17<sup>th</sup> September) his opposition to an arms embargo of Portugal, worried that it "would cause deep resentment here whilst encouraging those who would like to overthrow the Government." (Medlicott 1979, 268-269) Later, in the House of Commons, Eden, who had objected to Arthur Greenwood's protests in August by citing the country's vulnerable political and geographical position, (173) asked for understanding of the Portuguese as "the smallest of these Governments and the one singled out by Soviet Russia" at the Non-Intervention Committee. (*Hansards*, October 47, 1936)

Further insight into Wingfield's attitude to his job and his political outlook is possible through the only available archive of his writing, letters he wrote to his close friend and colleague in the diplomatic corps, Sir Horace Rumbold. One can infer from them that Wingfield was a man who would have been content to see Salazar's government continue unthreatened. There is an indication of Wingfield's views in a letter from 1940, which therefore came after his experience of the Portuguese regime, failed appeasement, the Spanish Civil War, and the Fascist invasion of several European countries. He was worried for the survival of democracy, not from an emboldened far-Right, but because it was espoused by British Socialists. He believed that they were anti-democratic and that their ideology contained tenets of Victorian Liberalism merely as a way to conceal their increasing authoritarianism. (Wingfield 1940) While there are no letters from his time as Ambassador in Lisbon, one he wrote just before his posting to Portugal is very revealing of his priorities. His central concern was with recent and prospective games of golf, which accounts

for one-third of the text. It is also the reason for the only reference to Portugal: he invited Rumbold to the then fashionable resort of Estoril to experience the new golf-links in pleasant winter weather. (Wingfield 1935) His reluctance to do anything that might have affected the *status quo* was made plain when he asserted his belief that in their career the greatest possible achievement was avoiding trouble. (Wingfield 1934) This complaisant approach was noticed across the border. Because of the close nature of Anglo-Portuguese relations and the ease with which military equipment went to and from Lisbon, the Spanish insurgents felt they were receiving preferential treatment from the British. (Preston 2017, 6)

The effectiveness of the Foreign Office was not only hamstrung by indolent and partial diplomatic staff. Letters written by Winston Churchill during the summer of 1936, when he was a Conservative MP, portray the governing party as largely against Spain's government forces and favourable toward Germany. He wrote a warning to André Corbin, the French Ambassador to Britain, against France giving military help to the Spanish Republicans because most of the Conservative Party supported the Spanish insurgents, and if the French government sent aid to the Republicans, it would only serve to draw Britain closer to Germany and Italy and make France more isolated (31<sup>st</sup> July). In reply to a letter from Major-General Sir Hugh Tudor, Churchill signalled a Conservative preference for Fascism against Communism. Tudor advocated Britain joining a Franco-German alliance so that Germany could defeat Russia, because Bolshevism represented the most ominous threat to international peace (4<sup>th</sup> August). Churchill responded that such views were shared by a large and increasing number of his party colleagues (16<sup>th</sup> August). In the same month, Conservative good-will was communicated to the Italian *Chargé D'Affaires* in London, Leonardo Vitetti, when MPs, other members of the party and right-wing representatives of the press told Vitetti of their fears of the Left winning in Spain and the more general Communist threat for Europe. It was of great encouragement to the Fascists. (Preston 2017, 5-6)

In contrast to his homogenous depiction of most party colleagues as pro-Fascist and anti-Communist, Churchill's position looks to

have been more reader-determined, adapting the views expressed to reassure the correspondent. When writing to Corbin he lamented that his fellow Conservatives had given credence to German scare-mongering about Communism (31<sup>st</sup> July), but two weeks later told Tudor that the Major-General's proposal of an alliance with Germany in order to defeat Russia looked increasingly unavoidable (16<sup>th</sup> August). Churchill had offered support to Eden a week before, repeating the danger he saw if the French became involved, and he encouraged the Foreign Secretary to continue with Non-Intervention, because France siding with the Spanish government would increase support for the Germans. Intriguingly, although he was neither a member of the Foreign Office nor the cabinet, in the same letter Churchill wrote that he made his recommendation despite German and Italian military assistance and Russian financial aid, as if they were common knowledge (7<sup>th</sup> August).

While he was in Lisbon Ralph Fox saw a statue, a monument to the novelist, Eça de Queiroz, which, in the ekphrasis in *Portugal Now*, shows Eça "flinging a marble veil over the privy parts of a plump and naked young lady", with a quotation (in translation) from the author underneath: "over the hard and naked truth he flung a delicate veil of fantasy".<sup>14</sup> The statue is *A Verdade* (The Truth), sculpted by António Teixeira Lopes in 1903. (Pinto 1904, 7-8) Fox calls it "a perfect symbol of modern Portugal", (1937, 21) but, if he means it is a prudish effort to cover what we all know is there, then the way he sees it is a version approved by Salazar and is not the statue: the art-work's inanimate nature shows the man forever on the verge of covering the topless woman (she is not actually naked) but failing to do so, leaving her exposed for the existence of the statue. What is presumed to be a successful attempt to cover the woman's torso in fact represents public nudity. It is analogous to how the British government hoped the NIA would somehow prevent or obscure the obvious and unstinting

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14 The subtitle of Eça's novel *A Reliquia* (a satire on religion and Portuguese life in which a young man journeys to the Holy Land, but loses his aunt's inheritance because he will not claim a prostitute's shirt to be Mary Magdalen's) is "sobre a nudez forte da verdade, o manto diáphono de phantasia" ("over the strong nakedness of truth, the diaphanous veil of fantasy"). (Queiroz 1887)

transport of planes, weapons and ammunition by Portugal, Germany and Italy.

Ralph Fox's attempt to undermine the Portuguese role in the Spanish Civil War, by detailing the facts of their assistance to the rebels, was as doomed an enterprise as the Non-Intervention Agreement. The nature of the governing British Conservatives at the time meant that for them a fear of Communism and the Soviet Union loomed over all international issues, and Eden's party, without the agreement, would have been more likely to favour helping those trying to depose the elected Spanish government. They could not because it was a government a large majority of the British people supported. As many in the diplomatic corps, such as Wingfield, shared this Conservative fear of the Left, blatant military transgressions could continue, officially unseen and unreported, as if the Fascist powers were blameless, and even to be encouraged.

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