

Colombian Foreign Policy and the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939

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Abstract

The Spanish civil war saw two different Liberal presidencies in Colombia. Contrary to common belief, they did not follow a unified policy towards Spain but instead faced different parameters for action which shaped their response. These policies, in turn, illuminate both the internal dynamics of the two administrations and how they conceived of Colombia's position on the world stage. By providing the national, international and wider structural contexts, this article will therefore use the Spanish conflict to shine a spotlight on the Santos and López governments and the development of Colombian foreign policy during the late 1930s.

Keywords

Colombia | diplomacy | foreign policy | Liberals | Spain | Spanish civil war

In mid-1937 Colombia's Foreign Minister, Gabriel Turbay, told Congress that 'Two transcendental events [...] had captivated this Ministry of Foreign Affairs attention' over the previous year. One was the Inter-American Peace Conference that took place in Buenos Aires in December 1936, that then-Foreign Minister Jorge Soto de Corral had attended as head of the Colombian delegation. But the incident that Turbay chose to highlight first was the Spanish civil war (República de Colombia, 1937: III). This may come as a surprise to students of the Spanish conflict, whose reading will have instilled the notion that the only Latin American nation of any significance in the war's historiography is Mexico. Although historians have referred to the cultural importance of Europe in Colombia, especially among elites (Wade, 2000; Silva, 2005; Arias, 2011; Muñoz, 2014), those interested in early twentieth-century Colombian history may also have the impression that the main foreign nations that concerned the country's leaders at this time were its continental neighbours, especially the United States (US). Yet if one compares the contemporary situation in both nations, it is not so strange that Colombian political leaders were preoccupied with the outbreak of war on the Iberian peninsula.

Colombia in 1936 had been under Liberal governments for six years, following over 40 years of Conservative rule. The country was also in the midst of President Alfonso López Pumarejo's 'Revolution on the March' – a radical project that aimed to increase working-class participation in politics and society as well as reforming Colombia's electoral, tax and land distribution systems and its constitution (Arias, 2011: 63–74). These endeavours combined with industrial and technological advancement in early twentieth-century Colombia increased the strength of leftist movements, including the Partido Comunista Colombiano (PCC, Colombian Communist Party) which, though still comparatively small, expanded in size and influence after 1935 (Medina, 1980: 351). The push towards what has been described as Colombia's first foray into modernisation, however, increased political

polarisation in the country as the workers and leftist Liberals threw their support behind López (Pécaut, 2001) while Conservatives and the Catholic hierarchy moved to oppose what they saw as the anti-clerical and socialist reforms of the López administration (Arias, 2000). Across the Atlantic, meanwhile, Spain had enjoyed five years of the Second Republic, which replaced the monarchy with an elected government that adopted a new constitution in December 1931 guaranteeing freedom of speech and association, extending the right to vote to women, legalising divorce and stripping the nobility of their privileges. Following the swing from left- to right-wing coalition governments in 1933–1934 a Popular Front government came to power in February 1936 under Manuel Azaña. The new government upset conservative and traditionalist Spaniards by introducing agrarian reforms that penalised landholders, overhauling the top-heavy military and granting autonomy to Spain's different regions (Romero Salvadó, 1999). A group of army officers who called themselves Nationalists therefore staged a coup in July which aimed to put an end to 'leftist' reformism. However, they were unsuccessful in many of the country's major cities, which meant that the uprising turned into a protracted civil war with extreme violence on both sides (Preston, 2013).

The war also burst outside the peninsula's borders as other nations and individuals saw Spain as the first battleground either against communism or fascism, while the two warring factions entered into a propaganda war to try to draw the international community onto their side. Colombia was not immune to the international interest in the Spanish conflict. In fact, the superficial parallels between the two countries, in addition to the weight of their shared history, ensured that its leaders and population felt the conflict just as deeply, if not more so, than the European nations that are normally the object of international histories of the Spanish civil war.

Although there were two Liberal administrations in power in Colombia during the war – under López until August 1938 and then under the more moderate Eduardo Santos who assumed the presidency for the remainder of the conflict – the scant historiography has tended to focus on the Conservative and Catholic reaction (Ayala Diago, 2011; Guerrero Barón, 2014). Those few works that have tackled the war's broader impact in Colombia have largely taken for granted that the two governments followed a more or less consistent policy towards Spain during this period (Bushnell, 1982; Hernández García, 2006). In contrast, this article will look at the two Liberal administrations and demonstrate that their presidents did not share a unified position on the Spanish civil war. It will also show how the shifting tension between the international and domestic contexts in the late 1930s created different parameters for action which shaped their Spanish policies. This in turn illuminates both the internal dynamics of the two governments and how they conceived of Colombia's position on the world stage. Introducing a more nuanced version of the Colombian response to the Spanish civil war will show how, in a period where debates around Colombian national identity have mostly been viewed through the lens of bipartisan domestic politics – that is, Conservatives vs Liberals – different notions of society and what it meant to be Colombian coexisted *within* the Liberal party and were also related to what was going on outside the country's borders.

This article therefore challenges the homogenising nature of the term 'Liberal Republic' to refer to the period 1930–1946 by depicting the stark contrast between López and Santos's foreign policies during the mid to late 1930s. In doing so, it expands upon those texts that have highlighted the difference between the domestic policies of the Liberal administrations of the period (Pécaut, 2001; Palacios, 2003; Gutiérrez Sanín, 2017). By analysing the operational and rhetorical challenges the two administrations faced, it also suggests a novel periodisation for 1930s Colombian foreign policy: guided more by ideology

and geared towards international coordination during the López administration (1934–1938), far more pragmatic and increasingly focused on the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores (MRE, Ministry of Foreign Relations)'s management of diplomatic and consular issues under Santos (1938–1942).

The main source materials for this article are the diplomatic and consular files of the MRE located at the Archivo General de la Nación in Bogotá, Colombia, supplemented by US diplomatic papers to highlight Santos's approach to inter-American cooperation. These documents provide a detailed account of the activity of Colombian representatives in Spain, but in many instances the communication is unidirectional: the messages from Bogotá to Madrid are largely absent. The Colombian government's view has been ascertained through references to MRE communiqués in the available documents as well as the overview of the MRE's activity presented annually to Congress by the Foreign Minister.

The López Administration

The 1936 constitutional reform process initiated by president López took direct inspiration from the 1931 Constitution of the Spanish Republic in allowing the state to expropriate private property for reasons of 'social utility', expanding suffrage, and establishing free, secular education (Tirado Mejía, 1981: 345). López was also attempting to mobilise the working class and found the support of the PCC an important tool in furthering this aim. The PCC was supportive of the Spanish Republican coalition and itself had embarked upon a Popular Front campaign following orders from Russia. Indeed, López appeared to endorse this move even if he never gave the Communists political representation in his government (Mora Toscano, 2016). Such endorsement found perhaps its starkest expression in the government's support for the Second Trade Union Congress in Medellín in August 1936,

which had been organised by important Communist and socialist leaders. López even sent two ministers to the Congress, an unprecedented act in Colombian history.

At the outbreak of war, then, the president was ideologically predisposed and politically bound to support the Spanish government, and he did not delay in demonstrating his adhesion to the Republican cause. This sentiment was conveyed by both houses of the Colombian Congress when, less than a week after the war's outbreak, they adopted resolutions of solidarity with Republicans. A year later, presumably to mark the anniversary of the war, the Colombian House of Representatives voted unanimously to send another message of 'Fervent solidarity to the Spanish people in arms who defend the cause of universal democracy' (Fondo Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Sección Consular y Diplomático (MRE/CD). 283 fo. 28, 23 July 1937). The Conservatives had announced a policy of electoral abstention in 1935, thereby making the House exclusively Liberal, and so this can be read as reflective of the attitude of López's government towards Spain.

The notion of 'universal democracy' is key to understanding López's support for the Spanish Republic as the rhetorical basis of his reformist programme was also the construction of a more democratic Colombia. This worked on two levels: by publicly supporting 'democratic' Republican Spain the president sought to legitimise his own revolution, while the Spanish Republic's apparent struggle for democracy made it the rightful government of Spain in López's eyes. Discourses around legitimacy also permeated the López administration's approach to non-intervention. Colombia refused to accord belligerent rights to the Nationalists on the grounds that it would mean 'Exonerating itself from its obligations and responsibilities towards the legitimate government with whom it has relations' (República de Colombia, 1937: 325) and it dealt only with representatives of the Spanish Republic. This position contrasted with that of many of the country's neighbours whose official 'neutrality' tended to mask anti-Republican attitudes on the part of the government. It

also contradicted the broader international view, reflected in the Non-Intervention Agreement, where 'neutrality' meant recognising the belligerent status of both sides and thus affording them the same rights.

In a further display of its support for the Republic, López's government maintained good relations with the Spanish government despite serious diplomatic incidents including the murder of nine Colombians by leftist militias in summer 1936, and the arrest and purported execution of the Colombian Consul in Bilbao a year later (this report was later found to be false). Lesser instances had sparked larger diplomatic rifts with other Latin American nations, such as the tensions over asylum which nearly broke relations between the Spanish Republic and Chile, or the murder of the sister of the Uruguayan Vice-Consul in Madrid, which was the ultimate cause of the severing of ties between Uruguay and the Republican government (Binns, 2016: 29). This was the practical articulation of Colombia's pro-Republican stance, which was shaped by the internal alliances and ideological disposition of the López administration, and was often in opposition to regional and international positions.

However, aside from the stark reality that Colombia had neither the resources nor the international standing to offer much more than messages of solidarity to the Republican government (Bushnell, 1982), there were other domestic constraints on López's Spanish policy which ensured that rhetorical support never solidified into material aid. The first, and arguably most important, of these was the existence of a strong opposition already incensed by the Colombian president's attempts to secularise and democratise Colombia. Both Conservatives and the Catholic hierarchy used the spectre of the Spanish civil war to condemn López publicly (Willford, 2005: 185–193). This included importing the vocabulary, concepts and figures of Spanish Nationalism for this resistance (Ayala Diago, 2011: 139),

thus converting the Liberal government, at least rhetorically, into nothing more than the Colombian embodiment of the Spanish Republic.

Second, and linked to the previous point, López was ultimately more concerned with his domestic programme and did not want to distract resources and attention away from his reforms or give his opponents more ammunition with which to attack them. It was after July 1936, for example, that he began publicly to deny the existence of a Popular Front in Colombia. In fact, the president announced a pause in the Revolution from December 1936 and ceased all reformist activity after Santos was chosen as the Liberal candidate for the 1938 elections in spring 1937 (Pécaut, 2001: 258–261). There were doubtless many factors that led to this decision, but the Spanish civil war evidently provided the opposition with more reason – or at least a greater pretext – to vilify López (Willford, 2005). Ironically, then, López's ideological inclination towards the Spanish Republic ultimately helped contribute towards the collapse of his domestic programme.

Thirdly, and as we will see, the principal focus of his foreign policy rested much closer to home, in the Americas. Given that it has already been established how Colombia took a distinct position from many of its neighbours, Spain became an awkward problem for the president. Thus, while internal factors helped shape López's stance on Spain, they also limited his ultimate room for manoeuvre. The result was a policy that was not clearly defined and that left considerable scope for individual action.

Architects of Foreign Policy

Colombian diplomatic officials and consular agents working in Spain did not hesitate to exploit this opportunity to take their own position on the war which, in many cases, reflected local circumstances and personal characteristics. For example, the Consul in Valencia, José Candela Albert, wrote to Soto on 31 December 1936 that there had been various ‘Colombian

citizens who resided within the jurisdiction of this Consulate [...] whose presence worried me given their status as religious figures' (MRE/CD 307, fo. 232). Concerned about the anticlerical violence carried out by leftist militias in the first months of the war, and indicating how this was shaping his view, he reported to the MRE on his Consulate's activity during the conflict:

From the first moments, the rising of the armed masses took on a markedly anarchist character that the authorities were unable to suppress. The determination of these unrestrained masses to free the convicts, whom they also armed, contributed to the intensification of this anarchy as they all began to commit a series of crimes that horrified all those of a democratic disposition. Those who suffered the most at the hands of these furious and passionate crowds were religious figures and priests, among whom neither age nor sex was respected. (MRE/CD 312, fo. 270, 19 July 1939)

In this account, it is the leftist 'masses' that are the enemies of democracy, not the Nationalists, and their targets are precisely the group of people whom Candela was charged with protecting. Moreover, the Colombian Consul in Reus, Pedro Fergusson, was an avowed capitalist and explicitly wary of Popular Front reforms even before the Spanish civil war had broken out (MRE/CD 312, fo. 270, 9 June 1936). Expressing a similar sentiment to his colleague in Valencia, Fergusson wrote to the Minister in August 1936 that 'It is clear what path the revolutionary movement is following in Spain: the extremist parties [...] rule the streets and cannot be controlled by the legally constituted government' (MRE/CD 312, fo. 270, 1 August 1936). Again, the 'revolution' is attributed to leftist militia rather than Franco's forces while the Spanish authorities are condemned for their inability to control them. Yet both these representatives' interpretations obscure the true complexity of events. In reality, Valencia was not an anarchist stronghold and actually became the seat of the Spanish government, made up largely of socialists and leftist Republicans, from November 1936 to

November 1937. This was the same government that generally succeeded in bringing the spontaneous violence under control by the end of 1936. Such inconsistencies demonstrate how these consuls' understanding of what was happening around them was refracted through the lens of their geographical and professional particularities. That such interpretations provoked overtly anti-Republican stances reinforced the ambiguous nature of the Colombian government's policy towards Spain.

Ideological factors also played into how different Colombian representatives viewed the Spanish conflict, as the case of Madrid demonstrates. This city was the site of the Colombian legation, the head of which changed shortly after the outbreak of fighting illustrating how, in the context of geographical and political continuity, different positions could be taken depending on individual ideological sensibilities when it came to the Spanish civil war. Carlos Uribe Echeverry was just finishing his term as Colombian minister on the eve of the war and he made explicit his anti-Republican views just before abandoning the legation in August 1936. In a telegram to Soto, he justified his suggestion for a temporary successor, Gabriel Melguizo Gutiérrez, on the grounds that as an 'intimate friend of Communist leaders' he would be able to expedite diplomatic proceedings between the two countries (MRE/CD 283, fo. 25, 15 August 1936). Two days later, reports circulated that Uribe had sought refuge in the US embassy because 'The Spanish government only listened to powerful diplomatic missions' (MRE/CD 283, fo. 25, 18 August 1936). The conflation of the Communists with the Spanish government illustrates Uribe's ideological opposition to the Spanish Republic while his public criticism of their actions revealed his contempt. On 18 August Melguizo took over the Madrid legation and he immediately called Uribe's story into question, emphasising that the Spanish government had provided him with all necessary safeguards and advising great caution and a cool levelheadedness when analysing events in Spain (MRE/CD 283, fo. 25). His concern about, and impatience with, what he perceived as

false news continued throughout the war as the Colombian press reported on events from the peninsula, and he took care to defend his hosts whenever such stories were brought to his attention by the MRE. Though Melguizo was self-declaredly not a Communist, the two representatives evidently had very different takes on the Spanish conflict despite occupying a similar role in the same place.

Melguizo was an interim *chargé d'affaires* and never officially assumed the role of his predecessor. However, that the López administration allowed him to continue acting as such for the duration of the war indicates that it wanted to facilitate greater support for the Spanish Republic among its diplomatic and consular officials, perhaps in recognition of the fact that many of their representatives were taking stances that conflicted with its Spanish policy. Though it is possible that the MRE simply could not find anyone else for the job, this argument is made more compelling by the fact that the ministry forced Uribe to account for his abandonment of the legation while simultaneously approving and praising Melguizo's diplomatic initiatives and efforts.

In addition to allowing representatives to formulate their own positions on the Spanish civil war, the lack of coherent policy on Spain also opened up a space for these individuals to take unilateral action based on these positions. The most significant expression of this was Melguizo's navigation of an extremely difficult situation in order to secure an indemnity payment from the Spanish government for the murder of nine Colombians by leftist militia in July and August 1936. That he was able to do so resolved a highly contentious issue in part because of the identity of those murdered: seven monks from the Brothers Hospitallers of Saint John of God order and their escort who had been travelling from Madrid to Barcelona in order to be repatriated to Colombia, as well as, on a separate occasion, a Claretian student who was travelling to Madrid with thirteen others from his religious order. Throughout the negotiations it is clear that Melguizo was taking matters into

his own hands rather than responding to government orders. For example, at the same time as impressing upon Republican authorities the importance of a swift payment to preserve good relations with Colombia, he was encouraging the MRE to accept a lower amount to ensure that there were no more delays (MRE/CD 283, fo. 26, 4–5 December 1936). Notwithstanding the obvious tensions provoked by the murders and the evident impatience of the Colombian government to secure a payment, the diplomat constantly reassured the MRE that the Spanish authorities were genuinely interested in resolving the issue and thus doing all they could to investigate the crimes. Despite vacillations from the Spanish government and suspicions on both sides, Melguizo's persistence and deft handling ensured the matter was finally completed on 26 February 1938 when a payment of 250,000 Colombian pesos – roughly USD\$142,500 – was made to Colombia (MRE/CD 283, fo. 30). Diplomatic relations were maintained throughout and Colombia was the only nation to receive such an indemnity from the Spanish government, even though similar instances occurred with other foreign nationals. In recognition of his work in securing the indemnity payment, the Colombian government awarded Melguizo an *Órden de Boyacá* – the highest peacetime decoration in the country (MRE/CD 283, fo. 30, 26 February 1938).

This activity illustrates how in many instances López's Spanish policy was a reaction to the updates his government was receiving from its on-the-ground representatives rather than a broader strategy that guided consular and diplomatic activity. These diplomatic and consular agents who, lacking an overarching framework, made their own decisions based on their interpretation of Spanish events are therefore key to understanding the formulation of Colombian foreign policy towards Spain during this period. Their reaction – both rhetorical and practical – to the Spanish civil war also highlighted the government's inability to impose coherence on the way its diplomats acted on the ground.

Americas First?

While the freedom Melguizo enjoyed may have furthered López's support for the Spanish Republic, the Colombian diplomat's actions in Spain often contravened his president's broader foreign policy objectives. The Spanish civil war did become an important issue for the Colombian government but, in the early 1930s, López's principal international concern was promoting inter-American cooperation. In December 1936, as the struggle continued on the Iberian peninsula, the Colombian delegation presented López's project for an Association of American Nations at the Inter-American Peace Conference in Buenos Aires based on the president's belief that the Americas needed their own system of continental solidarity for the organisation of peace (República de Colombia, 1937: xii). Part of Spain's significance for Colombia, then, was that it became the testing ground for some of the issues being discussed in the Inter-American Conferences of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

One such issue was that of asylum. This had been codified in the Havana and Montevideo treaties of 1928 and 1933 respectively and all Latin American nations upheld the right to asylum in their diplomatic buildings in Spain despite it not being a signatory to these treaties. Initially, the MRE seemingly ordered the legation not to apply this right in Spain but, in October 1936, it instructed Melguizo to tell the Spanish Foreign Ministry that Colombia too would employ the American understanding of the right to asylum, and would request that the Spanish government recognise this (MRE/CD 283, fo. 26). This change of heart was probably due to the fact that the government was being attacked at home and abroad for refusing to offer political asylum to persecuted individuals (MRE/CD 283, fo. 25, 17 September 1936) and it was in keeping with López's broader wish that American action be unified. However, despite lamenting the difficulty of adhering to the MRE's initial orders, Melguizo did not seem to make any real attempt to implement the new policy. In his update on the issue the following April he reiterated that 'our problem is minimal' (MRE/CD 283,

fo. 26, 7 April 1937) and the only recorded individuals who entered the legation during the period in which it was headed by Melguizo were two elderly Spanish ladies in July 1937, cousins María Saínz Marroquín and Carlota Seco Marroquín (MRE/CD 283, fo. 28, 28 July 1937). Moreover, the diplomat complained regularly about the trouble caused by the refugees and made every effort to have them moved from the legation as soon as possible.

Indeed, Melguizo was critical of the way in which other Latin American nations handled the matter of asylum. On 6 May 1937 the Spanish authorities broke into the Peruvian Consulate and arrested around 360 asylees and the Vice-Consul following reports that they were using a secret radio to communicate with the Nationalists (MRE/CD 283, fo. 28, 8 May 1937). On 26 May the MRE ordered Melguizo to support the Peruvian government's protest, which he explained he had already done but not without expressing his view that 'These matters would not arise if the Heads of Mission were here [in Madrid] and in control of their premises'; the Peruvian minister had been in Biarritz for the six months preceding the event (MRE/CD 283, fo. 28, 29 May 1937). That Melguizo waited until after his handling of the issue to inform his government shows how, once again, he was acting unilaterally, but in this instance it was hindering Colombia's foreign policy goals.

There is plentiful evidence that the diplomat believed that by minimising problems of asylum he was facilitating the rapid resolution of the indemnity issue, and this exemplifies the paradox that the Spanish civil war represented for the López regime: by allowing his diplomats free reign to interpret his Spanish policy, they could act in ways that positioned Colombia further away from its neighbours at a time when their president was calling for greater continental unity. Spain, then, became an uncomfortable problem for López as it both intruded upon and complicated his regional policy. This, in turn, reveals how it was not only López's Spanish policy that lacked consistency but also his wider foreign policy and attempts

to position Colombia internationally. More broadly, it also illustrates the fragility of his idea of inter-American harmony and regional cooperation.

The Santos Administration

In the May 1938 presidential elections Eduardo Santos beat left-wing Liberal candidate Dario Echandía. Santos wanted to avoid inciting further partisan rivalries so toned down the anticlerical and revolutionary rhetoric of his predecessor's government and moved to control popular agitation by limiting the right to strike. As a result, the Conservative opposition abandoned their policy of abstention and returned to parliament (Arias, 2011: 77–85). The rise of Santos, which in reality had begun in spring 1937, therefore meant the end of López's Revolution and the idea of Popular Front politics in Colombia, thus ensuring that the new president faced fewer domestic constraints on his Spanish policy than his predecessor. However, Santos was politically attuned to moderate Spanish Republicans and had met and/or worked with several of them from his time in Europe as Colombia's delegate to the League of Nations in the 1930s. The new president also came to power at a time when the Republican government was becoming more moderate in an attempt to overcome its international isolation, as evidenced by the disbandment of the International Brigades in September 1938. A combination of these shifting domestic and international contexts meant that Santos did not officially withdraw support for the Spanish Republic – although he certainly did not publicise it as much as López had – until it was clear they were going to lose the war.

It would be a mistake to believe that ideology guided Santos's view on the Spanish conflict, however. Overall, and especially when the Nationalists were close to victory, his approach was far more pragmatic than that of the previous president. Indeed, when recounting to Congress in 1939 the events of the previous year, the new Foreign Minister

Luis López de Mesa reiterated the notion that ‘The situation in Spain with respect to America cannot be considered extracontinental’ but, instead of discourses of democracy and legitimacy, what linked Colombia to its old colonial power was now ‘Blood, language, civilisation and culture’ (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Colombia, 1939: xcvi). Such lexis harked back to ideas of Hispanism and the exaltation of the colonial legacy, which were more in line with the Nationalists' conceptualisation of the relationship between Spain and its ex-colonies than that of the Republicans. This is unsurprising given that, four months prior to this speech, Franco's forces had won the Spanish civil war and Santos had overseen the recognition of the Spanish general. The message was clear: Colombia wanted good relations with Spain regardless of who formed the government. Such a realist approach to the Spanish conflict was doubtlessly facilitated by the reduced internal and external pressures on the Santos administration, but it still ensured that the president's Spanish policy was much more coherent than it had been under López.

López de Mesa's invocation of ‘culture’ was particularly relevant as the concept played a central role in Santos's approach towards Spain. One of the main domestic concerns of his presidency was improving his country's cultural and educational offering. From 1938 to 1942 Colombia saw an explosion of new institutions, university departments and degrees, and literary and scientific movements (Silva, 2005). Ultimately, and as various historians have shown, this paternalistic policy involved ‘raising’ the culture of the nation rather than incorporating ‘popular’ cultures into the national one (Wade, 2000; Muñoz, 2014). Within this context, Europe remained Colombia's cultural point of reference and, as we will see later, certain Colombians, including members of the Santos administration, perceived Spain to be among the most important of the ‘cultured’ European nations.

At the same time, the Santos administration's cultural ‘uplifting’ was accompanied by a tightening of immigration restrictions to avoid ‘undesirables’ entering the country

(Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Colombia, 1939: xix–xxi). The duality of positive cultural and negative immigration policies was also reproduced in Colombia's Spanish policy. Santos' main concern was preventing Republican masses entering Colombia following the defeat of the Spanish government, while allowing for the cherry-picking of a select few exiles (primarily intellectuals and artists) who would be able to contribute to his government's cultural and educational programmes (Hernández García, 2006: 235–248; Silva, 2013). Indeed, López de Mesa devoted a special section to Republican exile in his report to Congress in 1939. According to the Foreign Minister, the government 'Had to take special measures to impede the arrival of [thousands of Spanish citizens] in Colombia [...] limiting favourable resolutions to individual cases' (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Colombia, 1939: 181–182).

For Santos, then, the Spanish civil war represented both a threat and an opportunity to the society he was trying to create in Colombia and he introduced measures accordingly, thus harmonising his domestic and Spanish policies. That he was successfully able to espouse Hispanist discourse so as to ease relations with the Franco government while simultaneously inviting Republican intellectuals to Colombia underscores the president's pragmatism. Yet, as the case of the López administration demonstrates, the making and the implementation of policy were two different things, and Santos still had the bureaucratic machinery of the MRE to contend with.

Taking Back Control

It should come as no surprise that, prior to August 1938 when Santos assumed the presidency, the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was a disjointed institution, and this was reflected in some of the correspondence sent to and from Spain during the Spanish civil war. In May 1938, for instance, the Diplomatic Department sent a letter to Muñoz asking

about the well-being of a Colombian citizen despite his death having been reported to the Consular Department in January (MRE/CD 301, fo. 175, 1 June 1938). Such failings, which were not limited to Spain, were deemed unacceptable given that Colombia was ‘opening’ itself up to the world and so the López government had proposed to reform the MRE. On 25 February 1938 it issued Decrees 319, 320 and 231 ordering the reorganisation of the MRE, the creation of a diplomatic and consular qualification, and the codification of the functions of the different ministerial departments. Under the Santos administration these measures were strengthened and fed down to the Colombian legations and consulates across the world. On 2 and 5 September 1938 circulars about the new Ministry's plans and objectives were sent out, including a promise to send a complete summary of correspondence between the MRE and the various diplomatic missions (which, in the case of Spain, was particularly pertinent given that representatives there regularly complained that they did not receive all communications from Bogotá) and the proposal to implement special codes so that legations could communicate among themselves as well as with Colombia (MRE/CD 283, fo. 30, 30 September 1938).

Furthermore, perhaps learning from the mistakes of the López regime, the MRE under López de Mesa was much more focused on keeping its consular agents in line. This ranged from ironing out small procedural issues such as insisting that consuls send signed balance sheets each month even if there had been no transactions (MRE/CD 301, fo. 175, 10 October 1938) to issuing orders with deeper policy implications like the radio message to Melguizo on 11 September 1938 asking him to advise all consuls not to issue visas to certain emigrants whose entry into Colombia was restricted under new immigration laws (MRE/CD 283, fo. 30). Though all the institutional problems were clearly not solved in the first year of the Santos administration, there was a concerted effort to professionalise the MRE. This facilitated the fulfilment of specific objectives in Spain, particularly that of limiting

Republican emigration to Colombia, while simultaneously reducing the risk of diplomatic tensions with the Spanish government. In turn, the actions of Santos's representatives in Spain furthered his internal concerns, especially as they related to immigration, illustrating the overall coherence of the president's foreign and domestic policies as well as his aptitude for statecraft.

Colombia's previous diplomatic activity in Spain – most notably, the actions of Melguizo – was also brought into check. Though the situation on the Iberian peninsula was such that there were fewer diplomatic problems between the two countries of which the Colombian diplomat could assume charge, there was a definite change of tone in the communications between Madrid and Bogotá. The implication for Melguizo was that he no longer enjoyed the same free agency and support as he had under the previous administration. From September 1938 the majority of letters sent by the *chargé* were in response to an order received from Bogotá, generally for updates on issues of asylum and repatriation, which ensured that the Ministry was duly informed of all regular diplomatic activity in Spain. The one outstanding problem was that of a prisoner exchange for the son of the Consul in Vigo, Fernando Martínez de la Escalera, who had been arrested by the Spanish authorities in autumn 1937 on charges of espionage (MRE/CD 283, fo. 29, 17 November 1937). The following August Melguizo wrote to the new minister that *he* had done everything he could to secure the exchange but, given that the accused had not yet stood trial, 'It is not possible to resolve anything for the moment' and that 'For now it's necessary to wait for the case to be heard' (MRE/CD 283, fo. 30, 17 August 1938). Here, the diplomat positioned himself as the authority on the issue, insinuating that, after the trial, it would be he who oversaw its resolution. It was the MRE, however, that radioed Melguizo on 28 December to inform him that proceedings on the matter had resumed, indicating that Bogotá had taken charge and Melguizo's role was limited to serving his government. This is reinforced by his response, in

which he expresses his desire to 'support' negotiations and his conviction that 'We will be more successful on this occasion' (MRE/CD 284, fo. 32, 28–29 December 1938).

It therefore appears that Santos had a clear, overarching Spanish policy and that, notwithstanding their previously stated positions on the civil war, the diplomatic officials and consular agents in Spain were working in a way that was conducive to these objectives. Although this was perhaps a consequence of the broader push to reorganise the MRE rather than a specific effort to bring Colombian representatives in Spain to heel, the problems encountered in Spain were reflective of wider problems in Colombia's foreign policy and thus echoed the concerns driving the reorganisation process. This processAQ4 also had very specific benefits for Santos's approach to Spain: by ensuring officials responded to orders from Bogotá and making them accountable for their actions, his administration pursued a much more cohesive and less reactive strategy as regards the Spanish conflict.

Colombia Goes it Alone

In terms of his broader diplomacy, Santos was also less concerned with joint continental action than López had been. The US ambassador to Brazil suggested as much when he reported a conversation with Santos to the State Department on 9 August 1938 in which the Colombian president stated that at the Eighth International Conference of American States scheduled for December in Lima 'The Colombian delegation will go through the motions of supporting the plan for a league of American nations but [...] will not insist on its adoption'. The Association of American Nations had been the pet project of López but Santos, according to the US ambassador, realised that 'The plan is not practicable at this time' (Noble, Perkins and Nuermberger, 1956: 265). This understanding was possibly the result of the opposition of several states, including the US, Argentina, Brazil and Chile, which had been made clear to Santos when he visited Washington in July 1938 prior to assuming the

presidency (Noble, Perkins and Nuermberger, 1956: 25). In fact, his administration was seemingly more focused on fomenting Colombia's bilateral relations with various states, partly because fears of another European war sparked real concern about the impact this would have on the Colombian economy and culture and thus compelled the government to concentrate its energy on ensuring the protection of these (Bushnell, 1967: 103). The practicalities of such an approach were set out in a circular from the new Secretariat of the MRE to all Colombian consulates. In it, the MRE requested regular updates on what Colombian produce could be sold in their respective countries and which goods from those nations could be imported to Colombia 'for mutual benefit', as well as summaries of scientific achievements and outstanding works of art and literature that could 'stimulate our students and intellectuals' (MRE/CD 301, fo. 175, 23 August 1938).

Specifically, this policy meant closer economic and military ties with the US as exemplified by the Agreements for a US Naval and Aviation Mission to Colombia signed on 23 November 1938, and the negotiations around US financial assistance to Colombia from August 1939. In cultural terms, however, Europe remained the main point of reference, as López de Mesa told Congress in August 1939: 'Europe is of great interest to us for other reasons, primarily cultural ones, and we are geared towards conserving, as much as possible, our communication with [that continent]'. He added that Spain in particular reflected Colombia's 'spiritual heritage', meaning that it was of vital importance that the latter 'Faithfully observe the understanding of friendship between the two countries' (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Colombia, 1939: xliii). Santos's targeted contracting of Spanish intellectuals and artists to come and work in the cultural organisations and institutions established and strengthened during his presidency can be seen as the practical articulation of this view.

In terms of the Spanish civil war, however, the Foreign Minister took care to emphasise the bilateral nature of the Spanish–Colombian relationship by distinguishing Colombia's attitude during the conflict to that of its Latin American nations, claiming that ‘We never took a step that could have been considered an expression of partiality’ (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Colombia, 1939: xliii). As the first part of this article shows, this statement was not wholly accurate, yet it reveals how the Santos administration was purposefully setting Colombia apart from other Latin American nations that took more overtly partisan stances. At the Eighth Pan-American Conference held in Lima in December 1938, for instance, the Cuban delegation suggested a commission be created to invite both warring factions for an armistice and possible peace negotiations. López de Mesa used the example of Colombia's rejection of this motion to elucidate his point. Though López's government had responded in this way to a similar proposal the year before, it had done so with the proviso that it would be willing to take such action ‘If the belligerents were eventually willing to accept’ it and as long as it was a joint measure (República de Colombia, 1938: 325). On this occasion, however, the Foreign Minister explained how the Colombian delegation rejected the proposal outright on the grounds that it was ‘frankly useless’ and did not suggest other means of joint action in Spain (República de Colombia, 1938: xcv–xcvii). When he came to power, then, Santos began to retreat rhetorically and practically from greater regional organisation as he set Colombia on a more pragmatic and unilateral course, driven in part by the international situation. This was replicated in his actions in Spain; just as the Spanish civil war had been a way for Colombia to test ideas of Inter-American cooperation under López, Santos used the conflict to reinforce his country's dissociation from initiatives of continental unity.

The most obvious example of this behaviour was Colombia's recognition of Franco in April 1939. There exists a common view among US and Colombian historians that, in doing

so, Colombia simply followed the US's lead (Bushnell, 1982; Medina, 1980: 341). However, a closer look at the documents reveals how the final decision to recognise the Nationalists was Colombia's alone and it served mainly to further Santos's international strategy of building strong, bilateral relations with specific nations including, as outlined above, Spain. On 11 February 1939, after the fall of Barcelona, the Argentine government contacted their Latin American counterparts, suggesting joint American recognition of Franco once the British and French governments had taken similar action (MRE/CD 314, fo. 294). The Colombian response was tentatively positive but, when López de Mesa contacted Miguel López Pumarejo in Washington for the US government's view, it was clear that their northern neighbour was unwilling to partake in any collective measure (MRE/CD 314, fo. 294, 13–15 February 1939). From this moment on, the Santos regime proceeded to make unilateral decisions as regards its relations with Spain. Though Colombian officials doubtlessly presumed that the US was ultimately going to recognise Franco, and while they kept their ambassador updated, they continued on their course without seeking advice or guidance from the US government. So, after Madrid was taken on 28 March, López de Mesa informed Miguel López Pumarejo of his government's decision to recognise the Nationalist government 'Given the need to normalise our relations with Spain' and proposed 1 April as the appropriate date (MRE/CD 314, fo. 294). Accordingly, the Colombian government's decision was made *before* it knew when, and if, the US would recognise Franco's regime, and the reasons behind the decision were based on *Colombian*, not Latin American, or indeed US, concerns.

On the same day, and presumably inspired by the original Argentine suggestion, although without the reference to the Anglo-French position, the MRE informed the governments of Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador and Panama of its intention and stated its desire that it be a joint action (MRE/CD 314, fo. 294, 28 March 1939). The Colombian

minister in Quito had already informed the MRE that Ecuador's unique trade arrangement with Spain meant that the government was keen to recognise Franco 'as soon as possible', and the Chilean government, while it reacted positively to the idea, was involved in a dispute with the Nationalists over Republican refugees in the Chilean embassy in Madrid and so had to delay its recognition of Franco (MRE/CD 314, fo. 294, 31 March 1939). It requested that Colombia wait so that a joint declaration could still be made, but Santos's government went ahead and independently recognised the Spanish general on 1 April, doing little more than informing the other Latin American governments that it had done so. This highlights the hollowness of Santos's rhetoric of a joint declaration: the Colombian government stuck to the date it had originally proposed in full knowledge that it would be acting alone. It is not clear from the available documentation exactly why Santos was so keen to normalise relations with Spain, but one interpretation consistent with the argument laid out here is that the president saw the recognition of Franco as an opportunity to further his objective of making Colombia an independent international actor. Regardless, the contrast with López's expressed desire to secure regional consensus prior to any decisions on the Spanish conflict could not be starker. As per the letter to Washington, the decision was also made according to a pragmatic understanding of Colombia's relationship with Spain, as opposed to the ideological interpretation of the Spanish civil war pursued by the López government. Ironically, while López's incoherent foreign policy meant that the Spanish conflict ultimately became an impediment to his attempts to institutionalise Inter-American cooperation, the Santos was able to align his Spanish and international policies so that they were mutually reinforcing. The domestic situation clearly also played an important role here: with his rejection of the Revolution and condemnation of the PCC, Santos's government was not associated with the Popular Front and 'leftist reformism' in the same way that the previous administration had been. Though it is beyond the historian's remit to speculate on what *could* have happened

had López been in power in March 1939, it seems a fair assessment that Santos was in a better position to make such decisions without US instigation.

Conclusion

The Spanish civil war highlights the tensions between the international and domestic in late 1930s Colombia, and how the country was grappling with both its internal identity and its position on the world stage. Presidents López and Santos both tackled issues of what supporting one warring faction or another would mean for their domestic politics and whether their action in Spain should be an extension of continental alliances or a chance to go it alone. For the López regime, ideological outlooks and internal alliances shaped its stance on the Spanish conflict while strong domestic opposition limited potential for action. To add to the confusion, the 'revolutionary' situation in Spain in the early months of the war made it harder for the president to justify and defend his support for the Spanish Republic. As a result, his administration followed a confused and reactive policy towards Spain within which diplomatic officials and consular agents had large scope to act as they saw fit, thus compounding the sense of disjuncture. Santos, on the other hand, did not tie himself to any specific faction within Colombian politics, which meant that his Spanish policy could be guided by his government's vision of Colombia as a cultured and educated nation with strong bilateral links with several key nations. This was facilitated by the fact that, when he took office, the Spanish government was presenting itself as more moderate and the outcome of the war was becoming more obvious. Accordingly, Santos's approach to Spain was much more pragmatic and coherent than that of his predecessor, while the impetus his administration gave to strengthening the MRE institution constrained the action of Colombian representatives in Spain to ensure their activity contributed towards his Spanish policy.

The two presidents' stance on Spain also had implications for their broader foreign policy objectives, particularly as they pertained to regional cooperation. López's diplomatic priority was encouraging greater American unity but, as a result of the incoherence outlined above, his administration's actions in Spain were often in contrast to the rest of the continent. Santos, on the other hand, wanted to carve out a more individualistic global position for Colombia and the clarity of his Spanish policy both reflected and facilitated this. Therefore, Colombia's experience of the Spanish conflict reveals how, when foreign policy is weak, individual diplomatic and consular representatives have more space to take their own action, which can be of detriment not only to specific policies in particular countries but also to wider international objectives, creating not only a disjointed foreign policy but also a fragmented general statecraft.

Moreover, the Spanish civil war shines a light on the contradictions of Colombian politics in the late 1930s. By revising the generalisation that all Liberals were innately pro-Republican, this article furthers the argument that early twentieth-century Colombian politics is not necessarily best understood through a bipartisan lens. At least in terms of the political elites, there were clear divisions inside as well as between parties. By illustrating some of the discontinuities across the López and Santos regimes as regards their foreign policy, it also supports calls for greater distinction between the different administrations of the 'Liberal Republic' to understand how each envisioned Colombian society. Though it is beyond the scope of this article, we need further research into the personal views of the Liberal elites mentioned here – many of whom were also prominent public and intellectual figures – to elucidate their perspective on the Spanish civil war and its significance for Colombia.

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