

Britain and the Basque Campaign of 1937: The Government, the Royal Navy, the Labour Party and the Press.

To a large extent, the reaction of foreign powers dictated both the course and the outcome of the Civil War. The policies of four of the five major protagonists, Britain, France, Germany and Italy were substantially influenced by hostility to the fifth, the Soviet Union. Suspicion of the Soviet Union had been a major determinant of the international diplomacy of the Western powers since the revolution of October 1917. The Spanish conflict was the most recent battle in a European civil war. The early tolerance shown to both Hitler and Mussolini in the international arena was a tacit sign of approval of their policies towards the left in general and towards communism in particular. During the Spanish Civil War, it became apparent that this British and French complaisance regarding Italian and German social policies was accompanied by myopia regarding Fascist and Nazi determination to alter the international balance of power. Yet even when such ambitions could no longer be ignored, the residual sympathy for fascism of British policy-makers ensured that their first response would be simply to try to divert such ambitions in an anti-communist, and therefore Eastwards, direction.¹

Within that broad aim, the Conservative government adopted a general policy of appeasement with the primary objective of reaching a rapprochement with Fascist Italy to divert Mussolini from aligning with a potentially hostile Nazi Germany and Japan. Given the scale of British imperial commitments, both financial and military, there would be no possibility of confronting all three at the same time. These concerns fed into the policy of the Foreign Office and the British Cabinet towards the Spanish Civil War. There was a prevailing belief, fanned by the fiercely right-wing Ambassador Sir Henry Chilton and the even more militantly anti-Republican Consul in Barcelona Norman King, that in Spain, the victory of the Popular Front in February 1936 had signified the beginning of a pre-revolutionary crisis. In despatch after despatch, Chilton managed to convey the impression that the Popular Front cabinet was the puppet of extreme left Socialists and Communists. The Republican Government was seen as powerless to restrain an increasingly violent conflict between counter-revolutionary forces and revolutionary masses. Accordingly, the

¹ Paul Preston, 'The Great Civil War: European Politics, 1914-1945' in *The Oxford History of Modern Europe* edited by Tim Blanning, (Oxford University Press, 2000) pp. 153-184; Julián Casanova, *Europa contra Europa 1914-1945* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2011).

British Cabinet adopted a policy of tacit and benevolent neutrality towards the military insurgents, with the covert aim of avoiding any direct or indirect help to the legitimate Republican Government.²

The consequent official British line on the Spanish crisis was one of Non-intervention. This institutionalized hypocrisy originated in a suggestion by the French in response primarily to political opposition within France and, to a lesser extent, to British pressure. On 19 July 1936, José Giral had sent a telegram to the prime minister of the Front Populaire government in Paris, Leon Blum: ‘Surprised by dangerous military coup. Beg of you to help us immediately with arms and aeroplanes. Fraternally yours, Giral’. Blum’s tentative reaction was to help the legitimate Frente Popular government to combat the military coup. To do so favoured French strategic interests. The security of both the French Pyrenees frontier and the North African colonies depended on a friendly or neutral regime in Spain. If the Spanish military rebels were to win, there was a serious danger of right-wing Spain establishing close relations with France’s enemies, Fascist Italy and the Third Reich. Moreover, there was a legal basis in both French and international law for responding favourably to Giral’s request in that a 1935 commercial treaty between Spain and France contained a secret provision permitting Spain to purchase French munitions to the value of twenty million francs. After consulting Yvon Delbos, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Edouard Daladier, the Minister of Defense and Pierre Cot, the Minister of Aviation, Blum hesitantly decided to go ahead. On July 22, a formal and more specific request was received from Giral for twenty Potez bombers, fifty light machine-guns, eight Schneider artillery pieces, one thousand rifles, 250,000 machine-gun bullets, four million cartridges, and 20,000 bombs.³

The pro-rebel Spanish ambassador in Paris informed Charles Corbin, the French Ambassador in London, and asked him to inform the British Government about Giral’s request and Blum’s response. Blum was due in London on 25 July to discuss a British-French-Belgian

² Chilton to Eden, 10 January (FO371/20520, W344/62/41), 21 February 1936 (FO371/20520, W1639/62/41), 3 March, (FO371/20520, W2014/62/41), 24 March, (FO371/20520, W2868/62/41), 7 April, (FO371/20521, W3224/62/41), 18 April, (FO371/20521, W3449/62/41), 2 May, (FO371/20521, W3947/62/41), Ogilvie-Forbes to Eden, 3 March, (FO371/20520, W2015/62/41), 17 June, (FO371/20522, W5670/62/41); Enrique Moradiellos, *La perfidia de Albión: el Gobierno británico y la guerra civil española* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1996) pp. 64-87; Douglas Little, *Malevolent Neutrality: The United States, Great Britain, and the Origins of the Spanish Civil War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) pp. 184-220.

³ Jean Lacouture, *Léon Blum* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982) pp. 305-6; Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* 3rd ed. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977) pp. pp. 337, 343-4; Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p. 202.

response to the German occupation of the Rhineland. On 22 July, as Daladier and Cot were arranging the shipment, Blum received an urgent phone call from Corbin. According to a report from the American Ambassador to France, Jesse Straus, to the State Department, the British Government had asked Corbin to request that Blum come to London ahead of the scheduled meeting to discuss the situation with Stanley Baldwin and Anthony Eden.⁴ In fact, while Blum was in London, the matter was not raised at the tripartite conference. However, Baldwin and Eden left Blum in no doubt as to their concerns. According to Blum himself, in the vestibule of Claridge's hotel, Eden, whom he trusted implicitly, asked him if he planned to send arms to Madrid. When Blum confirmed that this was his intention, Eden said: 'It's your business; I ask only one thing of you, I beg of you, be cautious (C'est votre affaire, mais je vous demande une sùele chose - soyez prudent).'⁵

If the words of Eden and/or Baldwin did not make Blum consider abandoning the arrangements for sending arms to Spain, dramatic events in France did. The Spanish Military Attaché, Major Antonio Barroso, had leaked to the French right-wing press Blum's positive response to Giral's request. This provoked a vicious press campaign against Blum and the Spanish Republic. After a cabinet meeting on July 25, overshadowed by concerns of violence between left and right being provoked by events in Spain, a communiqué was issued to the effect that France would not deliver war matériel to Spain. It was the beginning of a process over the next two weeks that led to a complete reversal of Blum's commitment to helping the Spanish Republic and to the feeble compromise of Non-Intervention. By 1 August, the French government had decided to propose a non-intervention agreement and by 8 August had opted for a complete arms embargo.⁶

Although these decisions were not the result of any official ultimatum to the French Government authorized by either the Cabinet or the Foreign Secretary, there was no lack of friendly suggestions. On 31 July, Winston Churchill wrote to Corbin the French Ambassador: 'I think I ought to let you know that in my judgement the great bulk of the

⁴ Straus to Secretary of State, 27 July 1936, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1936* Vol. II (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1954) pp. 447-9; Lacouture, *Léon Blum*, p. 307.

⁵ David Carlton, 'Eden, Blum and the origins of Non-Intervention', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. VI, No.3, 1971, pp. 41-5; Anthony Eden, *Facing the Dictators* (London: Cassell, 1962) p. 405; Joel Colton, *Léon Blum. Humanist in Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966) p. 241.

⁶ David Wingeate Pike, *La Galia dividida: Los franceses y la Guerra Civil española* (La Coruna: Ediciones del Viento, 2016) pp. 54-7.
pp. 18-22; Straus to Secretary of State, 31 July 31, 2 August 1936, *FRUS 1936*, Vol. II, pp. 450-2, 454-5, .

Conservative Party are very much inclined to cheer the so-called Spanish rebels. One of the greatest difficulties I meet with in trying to hold on to the old position is the German talk that the anti-Communist countries should stand together, I am sure if France sent aeroplanes etc to the present Madrid Government and the Germans and Italians pushed in from the other angle, the dominant forces here would be pleased with Germany and Italy, and estranged from France. I hope you will not mind my writing this, which I do of course entirely on my own account. ... I am sure that an absolutely rigid neutrality with the strongest protest against any breach of it is the only correct and safe course at the present time.’⁷

On 5 August, in an effort to clarify the British position, Blum sent Admiral Darlan to speak with the First Sea Lord, Admiral Ernle Chatfield, about the dangers of a rebel victory in Spain. Chatfield made it quite clear that the British were determined to remain totally neutral, a position which Darlan quickly made his own. Returning to France, he told Blum that, if French intervention in Spain led to European war, France could not rely on British support. This weighed heavily with Blum.⁸ Then, on 7 August Sir George Clerk, allegedly acting on his own initiative, spoke to Delbos in terms highly critical of the Madrid government. His words were clearly intended to make the French cabinet revise its pro-Republican stance. His report received the following response from the Foreign Office: ‘Your language is approved and appears to have had good results’. It is very likely that Delbos was unaware that Clerk was not speaking on behalf of the British Government. Certainly, Clerk’s words influenced him in the direction of caution at the cabinet meeting which followed and at which the decision was taken to abide by strict non-intervention. The relevant press communiqué stated that the government has ‘decided unanimously not to intervene in any way in the internal conflict in Spain.’⁹

Even if no explicit British pressure was applied, there can be little doubt that there were strong, and decisive, hints that, in the event of war, France would be left without crucial British support.¹⁰ It was hoped in London that if Non-intervention could be imposed, the

⁷ Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill 1922-1939* (London: Heinemann, 1976) pp. 781-2.

⁸ Chatfield, record of conversation with Darlan, 5 August, *Documents on British Foreign Policy* 2nd Series, Vol. XVII (London: HMSO, 1979) pp. 61-2; Gallagher, ‘Leon Blum’, pp. 60-1.

⁹ Clerk to FO, 7, 8, 12 August 1936, *DBFP* 2nd Series, Vol. XVII, pp. 71-2, 77-8, 89; *The Times*, 26 July 1936; Carlton, ‘Eden, Blum’, pp. 47-52; John E. Dreifort, *Yvon Delbos at the Quai d’Orsay. French Foreign Policy During the Popular Front* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1973) pp. 44-9; Moradiellos, *La perfidia*, pp. 64-87; Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, pp. 40I-03.

¹⁰ Lacouture, *Léon Blum*, pp. 311-12; Dreifort, *Yvon Delbos*, pp. 50-1.

Spanish war would peter out for lack of arms and ammunition. Accordingly, to avoid a lengthy process of international treaty-making, on 15 August, London and Paris exchanged diplomatic notes agreeing to Non-Intervention in Spain. It was announced that a strict embargo on the delivery of weapons and munitions to Spain would begin as soon as the governments of Germany, Italy, the Soviet Union and Portugal agreed.¹¹

Like the French, the British government was committed at all costs to diminishing the risks of a European conflagration. Moreover, where the Spanish war was concerned, Conservative decision-makers in London tended to let their class prejudices prevail over the strategic interests of Great Britain. The journalist Henry Buckley was told by a British diplomat that ‘the essential thing to remember in the case of Spain is that it is a civil conflict and that it is very necessary that we stand by our class’.¹² This was obvious from the first. Mussolini and his Foreign Minister Count Galeazzo Ciano proceeded in the confidence that Britain approved of their intentions. Ciano told the French Ambassador that ‘because Portugal had declared its sympathy with insurgents and as the Portuguese hardly ever came out in the open on any matter without first being assured of British support owing to long-standing Anglo-Portuguese alliance, Great Britain was in favour of the rebels.’¹³ When King Vittorio Emanuele learned that Mussolini was going to send aircraft to Franco, he insisted that the British Embassy be told. Accordingly, on 28 July 1936, Ciano informed the British Chargé d’Affaires in Rome, Edward Ingram, who allegedly replied that ‘the Foreign Office had understood the Italian initiative in its precise significance’.¹⁴

After the point of no return, all of the feedback from London reinforced the assumption that the British would do nothing to impede Italian help for Franco. Even as the first Italian aircraft were on their way to Morocco, the Italian Chargé in London, Leonardo Vitetti, reported on the widespread sympathy to be found within the highest reaches of the Conservative Party for the Spanish rebels and for Italian fascism. Vitetti’s conclusions derived from conversations with Conservative M.P.s, Captain David Margesson, the

¹¹ Moradiellos, *La perfidia*, pp. 71-2.

¹² Henry Buckley, *Life and Death of the Spanish Republic* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1940) p. 321.

¹³ Ingram to Eden, 28 July 1936, *Documents on British Foreign Policy* 2nd Series, Vol. XVII (London: HMSO, 1979) pp. 31-2.

¹⁴ Nino D’Aroma, *Un popolo alla prova. Dieci anni di guerra (1935-1945)* 4 vol. (Palermo, Editore Cusimano, 1967) I, pp. 282-3; Nino D’Aroma, *Vent’anni insieme: Vittorio Emanuele e Mussolini* (Bologna, Editoriale Capelli, 1957) p. 242. There is no evidence of this conversation in either the British or Italian diplomatic documents.

Conservative leader of the House, with senior Tories at the Carlton Club and with representatives of the ultra-right-wing Rothemere press. Tory MPs told Vitetti that the events in Spain were the direct consequence of ‘subversive Soviet propaganda’ and that the Spanish left had to be crushed. Leo Amery, one-time First Lord of the Admiralty, told him that the Spanish war raised ‘the problem of the defence of Europe against the threat of bolshevism’. Ciano was delighted and encouraged further contacts. Vitetti reported that British support for French proposals for non-intervention was based entirely on the belief that it was a useful device for preventing France helping the Spanish Republic.¹⁵

Franco never ever admitted in public that ‘perfidious Albion’ had made an enormous contribution to his eventual success. The hastily created administration created by the rebels, the Junta de Defensa Nacional, commissioned a series of legal reports on the international situation. The first, produced on 4 August, was optimistic: ‘The general drift of the diplomatic situation is favourable to our movement firstly because of the overwhelming impetus of the totalitarian states throughout the world and secondly because even in the states locked in liberalism, or even in the sway of the Popular Front, there exists, in proportion to the danger, a nationalist reaction. France, if not entirely hostile, is hardly favourable..., England is practically neutral, we have the sympathy of Portugal, Italy and Germany.’¹⁶ Within a week a much more upbeat report was presented by the legal team declaring that ‘Overall, the English favour us, as can be appreciated by the forthright, open and admirable assistance given us by Portugal, a country tied to the British to such an extent that it must be admitted that Oliveira Salazar has the fullest approval of the British Government in aiding us on the scale that he does.’¹⁷ In early August, Juan de la Cierva, the Spanish inventor of the autogyro (the precursor of the helicopter), who had helped arrange Franco’s flight from the Canary Islands to Morocco, told Vitetti that he had bought all the aircraft available on the

¹⁵ Vitetti to Ciano, 29 July, 3 August, Ciano to Vitetti, 30 July 1936, *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, 8^a serie, vol. IV (10 maggio - 31 agosto 1936) (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato/Libreria dello Stato, 1993) pp.711-13, 719-20, 736-7; Ismael Saz Campos, *Mussolini contra la II República: hostilidad, conspiraciones, intervención (1931-1936)* (Valencia: Edicions Alfons el Magnànim, 1986) pp. 204-5; Enrique Moradiellos, *Neutralidad benévola. El Gobierno británico y la insurrección militar española de 1936* (Oviedo: Pentalfa Ediciones, 1990) pp. 172-3.

¹⁶ Enrique Moradiellos, ‘El mundo ante el avispero español. Intervención y no intervención extranjera en la guerra civil’, en *Historia de España Menéndez Pidal Tomo XL. República y guerra civil* edited by Santos Juliá, (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 2004) p. 253.

¹⁷ Archivo del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, legajo R-981, Expediente 5 (AMAE: R-981, E-5); José Antonio Durango, *La política exterior del general Franco, 1938-1940*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Universidad de Zaragoza, 1992) pp. 1-5; Francisco Serrat Bonastre, *Salamanca, 1936. Memorias del primer «ministro» de Asuntos Exteriores de Franco* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2014) pp. 162-3. On the legal team, see Ángel Viñas, preface to Serrat Bonastre, *Salamanca, 1936*, pp. 61, 79.

free market in Britain and was about to send them to General Mola. De la Cierva said that ‘the British authorities had given him every facility even though they knew only too well that the aircraft were destined for the Spanish rebels’.¹⁸

The British were inclined by their considerable commercial interests in Spain to be hostile to the Republic. The business community believed that the anarchists and other Spanish revolutionaries were liable to seize and collectivize British holdings.¹⁹ Equally, members of the British government and the diplomatic corps, for reasons of class and education, sympathised with the anti-revolutionary aims of the Nationalists as they did with those of Hitler and Mussolini. Moreover, it was commonplace for Spanish aristocrats and the scions of the main sherry exporting families to be educated at English Catholic Public Schools like Beaumont, Downside, Ampleforth and Stonyhurst. There was thus a nexus of upper class contacts and friendship which intensified the underlying hostility of British Conservatives to the Spanish Republic.²⁰ Added to the determination to avoid war, these factors made the adoption of a policy of non-intervention a logical step.

Non-Intervention was ostensibly intended to neutralise and localise the Spanish war. However, it hobbled the Spanish Republic far more than it did the military rebels. The contradictions and deceit behind Non-Intervention were finally exposed by the humiliations suffered by the British government during the war in the Basque Country. A substantial degree of responsibility lay with Sir Henry Chilton who was openly and unremittingly hostile to the government to which he was accredited. The American Ambassador, Claude Bowers wrote that Chilton ‘was violently against the loyalists from the first day’.²¹ From his splendid French residence in St Jean de Luz, where he remained until his retirement in late 1937, Chilton maintained cordial relations with the military rebels on the Basque side of the border. This was particularly true of his friendship with the Carlist Major Julián Troncoso Sagredo, the Francoist governor of Irún.²² The information supplied by Chilton to London about what

¹⁸ Vitetti to Ciano, 7 August 1937, *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, 8^a serie, vol. IV, p. 774.

¹⁹ Moradiellos, *Neutralidad benévola*, pp. 95-103,

²⁰ Paul Preston, ‘The Answer lies in the Sewers: Captain Aguilera and the Mentality of the Francoist Officer Corps’, *Science & Society*, Vol.68, No.3, Fall 2004, p. 289; Peter Day, *Franco’s Friends. How British Intelligence Helped Bring Franco to Power in Spain* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2011) pp. 10-14.

²¹ Claude G. Bowers, *My Mission to Spain* (London: Gollancz, 1954) pp. 288-91.

²² On Troncoso, see Gabriel Pretus, ‘Commander Troncoso: a man for all seasons in the northern campaign of the Spanish Civil War 1936-1937’, unpublished M.A. Dissertation, RHUL.

was happening in the Basque Country was almost exclusively based on what he learned from Troncoso.²³

The British commitment to Non-Intervention was reiterated on 8 March 1937 when Whitehall secured the agreement of the other powers to the establishment of a system of land and maritime observers to prevent the arrival of arms and volunteers. Great Britain would undertake to patrol Spain's northern coast. This was met with outrage in Franco's headquarters where it was denounced as interference on the part of the Republic.²⁴ Until this point in the war, the Royal Navy had not faced an onerous task in the Bay of Biscay but this was about to change dramatically. The defeat of the rebels at the battle of Guadalajara on 20 March 1937 had imposed on General Franco a momentous strategic volte-face. Increasing evidence that the Republic was concentrating its best-trained and equipped troops in the centre of Spain and leaving other fronts relatively neglected led to a decision to abandon the obsession with Madrid and to destroy the Republic by instalments elsewhere. By late March, rebel priority was being given to operations in the north aimed at the seizure of the armaments factories and coal, iron and steel reserves of the Basque provinces.²⁵

The establishment of the control system around the time that Franco was about to launch his assault on the Basque Country would seriously put to the test the British commitment to Non-Intervention. Franco would attempt to block the delivery of food supplies to a starving Bilbao which was totally dependent on sea-borne trade. Since September 1936, Vizcaya had been cut off from land transport from France and separated from the rest of Republican Spain other than Asturias and Santander. Traditional agricultural supplies from the Levante and the Castilian provinces were no longer possible. Food stocks had been depleted by the influx of refugees from the neighbouring Basque provinces of Guipúzcoa and Álava. Since the beginning of the Francoist attack at the end of March, many civilians fled before the advancing rebel forces. The population of Bilbao would soon have more than doubled as a

²³ G.L. Steer, *The Tree of Gernika: A Field Study of Modern War* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938) pp. 195-6

²⁴ Almirante Juan Cervera Valderrama, *Memorias de Guerra (1936-1939)* (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1968) pp. 151-3.

²⁵ Alfredo Kindelán Duany, *Mis cuadernos de guerra* 2ª edición, (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1982) pp.120-3; General Jorge Vigón, *General Mola (el conspirador)* (Barcelona: AHR, 1957) pp.303-4.

result. By mid-April, it would be reported that bread and milk had run out and the adult population was living off rice and beans.²⁶ Bilbao was entirely reliant on deliveries by sea.

This changed situation would dramatically alter the responsibilities of the Royal Navy whose duties had so far been concentrated on evacuating refugees. In the spring and summer of 1937, British merchant vessels under the protection of the Royal Navy would evacuate more than forty-six thousand refugees, largely Basques, from Santander and the Asturian ports of Gijón, Avilés and Ribadesella.²⁷ Now the determination of Franco to starve Bilbao into submission became an issue for London. Lord Cranborne of the Foreign Office wrote that ‘the Non-Intervention Agreement does not prohibit the carrying of food to Spain by ships of the participating countries. HMG would in fact protest against any interference on the high seas with British ships carrying food or other commodities, and the Navy would prevent such interference whenever they could.’ Most Royal Navy officers were broadly in favour of the military rebels. This was largely a consequence of the slaughter when below-decks crews mutinied against rebel naval officers at the beginning of the war. At the same time, an exception was made in the case of the Basques who were admired because it was believed that they hated Communists and Fascists equally.²⁸

On 30 March, *The Times* reported that Franco’s headquarters ‘had broadcast a warning that British steamers should respond quickly to any signals by insurgent warships off the coast of Spain’. The newspaper went on to say that, while British merchant ships should obey within Spanish territorial waters, ‘the British Government are not prepared to tolerate the stopping of British steamers on the high seas for the purpose of search’.²⁹ Franco’s chief of naval staff, Admiral Juan Cervera Valderrama, had threatened that ‘any British ship found within territorial waters will be seized or sunk.’ Behind the warning was the knowledge that the

²⁶ Manuel González Portilla & José María Garmendia, *La guerra civil en el País Vasco* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1988) pp. 94-5; José Antonio Aguirre y Lecube, *El Informe del Presidente Aguirre al Gobierno de la República sobre los hechos que determinaron el derrumbamiento del frente del norte (1937)* (Bilbao: Editorial La Gran Enciclopedia Vasca, 1978) pp. 263-86; Helen Graham, *The Spanish Republic at War 1936-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) pp. 252-3; *Daily Herald*, 17 April 1937.

²⁷ Silvia Ribelles de la Vega, *La Marina Real Británica y la guerra civil en Asturias* (Oviedo, Real Instituto de Estudios Asturianos, 2008) pp. 126-35, 246-7.

²⁸ Report by Captain of HMS Fame, 19 December 1936, ADM116, quoted by Ribelles de la Vega, *La Marina Real Británica*, pp. 88-9; James Cable, *The Royal Navy and the Siege of Bilbao* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) pp. 35-6.

²⁹ *The Times*, 30 March 1937.

principal suppliers of food to Bilbao were twelve merchant ships, flying under the British flag, that had been contracted by the Basque Government.³⁰

The first crisis took place around 5.30 a.m. on 6 April 1937. The *SS Thorpehall*, a British cargo vessel bound for Bilbao with food supplies, sent a distress signal to *HMS Brazen*, one of the four Royal Navy destroyers of the Home Fleet patrolling the 150 miles of the North coast of Republican Spain. *Thorpehall*'s captain reported that his ship had stopped outside Spanish territorial waters by the Spanish rebel armed trawler *Galerna* which had fired a shot across his bows. *Brazen*'s captain, Commander Taylor, went to investigate. While *HMS Brazen* was alongside *Thorpehall*, the rebel battlecruiser *Almirante Cervera* arrived and signalled that food would not be allowed to enter Bilbao. *Brazen* was outgunned by the Spanish warship so Commander Taylor stalled and told the *Thorpehall*'s captain not to proceed. At that point, the *Brazen* was reinforced by the arrival of the destroyer *HMS Blanche* whose captain, Commander Clifford Caslon, had just been made Senior Naval Officer North Spain. A potentially disastrous confrontation was avoided when a German pocket battleship arrived and, unexpectedly, advised the two rebel warships to leave and thus avoid an incident with the British. The *Almirante Cervera* reappeared and made some threatening moves towards the *Thorpehall* but was driven off by the combination of *HMS Brazen*, *HMS Blanche* and *HMS Beagle* another of the four British ships patrolling the area. The fourth, *HMS Brilliant*, was refuelling in La Coruña. *Blanche* signalled to the Spanish battle cruiser: 'His Majesty's Government would not allow any action to be taken against British merchant ships outside of territorial waters.' *Thorpehall* was then escorted to the limits of territorial waters.³¹

The *Thorpehall* reached Bilbao safely thanks to the skill and good sense of Commanders Taylor and Caslon. However, the incident raised the serious problem for the British Government of how the policy of Non-Intervention could be made compatible with the protection of British merchant shipping. This was a problem rendered apparently intractable by the stance of Salamanca that such protection constituted intervention on the side of the Republic. The pusillanimous manner in which the Government initially responded to the problem would lead to acute problems both in the House of Commons and within British public opinion in general.

³⁰ Cable, *The Royal Navy*, p. 46.

³¹ Cable, *The Royal Navy*, pp. 47-53.

The complications of the issue were exacerbated by the report on the *Thorpehall* incident sent by Commander Caslon to the Admiralty: ‘Incident of British ship *Thorpehall* today 6 April is accounted for by Insurgent offensive against Bilbao and close blockade, which has been started to prevent supplies of any kind reaching that port in particular. Blockade is effective and I consider further incidents are likely unless prevented by concentration of my forces for each British merchant ship, which arrives, which amounts in fact to blockade running by armed forces.... Alternatively I consider that (a) reinforcements are necessary. (b) British ships should be stopped trading to Bilbao whilst close blockade lasts.’ In fact, Caslon seriously overestimated the efficacy of the Francoist blockade. Nevertheless, his two recommendations made sense and he sent a signal to British merchant shipping that any vessel approaching Bilbao should inform *HMS Blanche*. On the basis of information supplied by Troncoso, the British Ambassador Sir Henry Chilton also wrote to London that ‘Bilbao is now effectively blockaded by one battleship, cruiser, light cruiser and destroyer plus armed trawler, all of which operate outside territorial waters’ and concluded that ‘policy of protection of British shipping on high seas cannot be carried on in present circumstances affecting Bilbao’.³²

When the Cabinet met on 7 April, the implications of the *Thorpehall* incident were discussed at length. Sir Samuel Hoare, the First Lord of the Admiralty, expressed concern that a situation had nearly occurred in which a British ship was captured by a Spanish Cruiser in the presence of three British Destroyers. It was taken for granted that the rebel blockade was effective even though, Neville Chamberlain, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pointed out that on the high seas General Franco was not entitled to stop ships, as he did not possess belligerent rights. There was also debate as whether rebel warships had the right within territorial waters to impose a blockade or to sink or capture any foreign ships carrying foodstuffs. A committee was appointed to discuss the matter and its conclusions were discussed at the Cabinet meeting of 11 April.

In the meanwhile, Troncoso visited Chilton. Acting on direct instructions from General Franco, he informed Chilton threateningly that, if the four British Merchant Ships currently at St. Jean de Luz attempted to proceed to Bilbao, they would be ‘resisted by insurgent warships

³² ADM 116-3514; Chilton to Eden, 7 April 1937, FO 371/21352, W6801/23/41; Cable, *The Royal Navy*, p. 53.

by all possible means even at risk of serious incident which they are most anxious to avoid.’ He also claimed mendaciously that the Nationalist fleet had mined the approaches to Bilbao. Chilton asked Caslon to inform London that rebel interference could not be avoided within Spanish territorial waters because the Francoists were determined to prevent the entry of foodstuffs in order to hasten the fall of Bilbao. In consequence, at the 11 April Cabinet meeting, it was decided to send both the cruiser *HMS Shropshire* and the battleship *HMS Hood* to the Bay of Biscay to ensure that ‘the British forces in that region might not be inferior to those of General Franco’. Meanwhile, British merchant ships en route to Bilbao were being advised to proceed temporarily to St. Jean de Luz.

At the Cabinet meeting, mealy-mouthed concerns were expressed that protection of British shipping might provoke Germany and Italy into abandoning Non-Intervention. This was utterly hypocritical since the cabinet was already fully cognisant of the massive existing scale of Italo-German aid to Franco. Even more cowardly was a discussion about requesting Franco to allow British ships carrying only ballast to enter Bilbao in order to leave with iron ore. It was finally decided to send a message to Franco as follows: ‘We cannot recognise or concede belligerent rights and we cannot tolerate any interference with British shipping at sea. We are, however, advising our shipping that, in view of the conditions at present prevailing in the neighbourhood of Bilbao, they should not go into that area so long as these conditions continue.’ It was decided that Hoare should instruct the Naval authorities on the Spanish coast that ‘all Naval protection is to be withdrawn from British merchant ships which disregard the wishes of His Majesty’s Government that they should not proceed to the Bilbao area’. Hoare duly informed Chilton and Royal Navy warships in the Bay of Biscay of this. The decision was effectively based on the Francoist threats from Troncoso. The opinion of the British Consul in Bilbao, Ralph Stevenson, had not been sought.³³

On the following day, Troncoso again visited Chilton. He asked what would be the British reaction if rebel warships ‘either prevented British ships from entering Spanish territorial waters by manoeuvring round them or fired upon any British ship they found inside the three mile limit’. Chilton was unable to answer.³⁴ The implicitly humiliating position of the British Government was underlined on the same day when Pablo Azcárate, the Spanish

³³ Cabinet minutes, 7, 11 April 1937, CAB 23-88, pp. 37-41, 59-84; Eden to Chilton, 11 April 1937, FO371/21352, W6936/23/41. See also Steer, *Gernika*, pp. 196-7.

³⁴ Chilton to Eden, 12 April 1937, FO371/21352, W7033/23/41.

Republican Ambassador visited the Foreign Office. Sir George Mounsey told him that 'in view of the conditions prevailing in the neighbourhood of Bilbao', British merchant vessels were being advised to steer clear. Azcárate replied that the Republican Government could understand that there would be no protection for ships within the three-mile limit. However, since the Basque Government had fortified the coast with long-range guns, 'it would therefore only be necessary for British merchant ships to be assured of protection up to the three-mile limit as once they were within that limit they would be amply protected by the shore defences.' When Mounsey reiterated the alleged dangers from rebel air attacks and mines, Azcárate replied: 'this in fact meant that His Majesty's Government were giving way to General Franco's threats and admitting his right to blockade in fact, even though they denied it in words.' An embarrassed Mounsey insisted that HMG's position was simply a reaction to an objective situation to which Azcárate responded that this line 'would appear to the Spanish Government as completely contradictory of their traditional advocacy of the freedom of the seas'.³⁵

On the following day, the French Ambassador, Charles Corbin, made it clear to Eden that his government shared Azcárate's dismay. Eden had argued unconvincingly that to break Franco's blockade by force would constitute an intervention on the side of the Spanish Republic.³⁶ This was a view shared by the liberal press in both Britain and France and, needless to say by General Franco himself. Troncoso informed Chilton on 16 April of Franco's satisfaction at the position of the British Government.³⁷

The policy towards the Spanish conflict of the British Conservative Party was facilitated by divisions within the Labour Party. There was a pacifist element within the party and a substantial Catholic element that was influenced by news about anti-clerical atrocities committed within the Republican zone. The left and the unions, led by Ernest Bevin, favoured action to undermine the government's policy of appeasement. The right was inhibited by suspicion of Soviet military intervention in favour of the Spanish Republic. Accordingly, in October 1936, after initially endorsing the government's non-intervention policy, the Labour Party's principal bodies, the Parliamentary group, the executive and the

³⁵ Mounsey conversation with Azcárate, FO371/21352, W7196/23/41.

³⁶ Eden to Hugh Lloyd Thomas (British Minister at Paris Embassy), 13 April 1937, FO371/21352, W7162/23/41.

³⁷ Cable, *The Royal Navy*, pp. 66-7; Chilton to Eden, 16 April 1937, FO371/21352, W7418/23/41; Lloyd Thomas to Eden, 18 April 1937, FO371/21331, W7493/7/41.

Trades Union Congress all called for the Spanish Republic to be granted its rights at international law to buy arms. Nevertheless, the leadership of the Labour Party had little stomach for anything other than humanitarian assistance although numerous individuals volunteered to fight in the International Brigades and there were many Members of Parliament who were determined to change Government policy. Outrage over the Government's response to the war in the Basque Country emboldened them.³⁸

One of the most committed was the M.P. for Derby, Philip Noel-Baker, a fervent supporter of the Spanish Republic, who was determined to change government policy. Already in the autumn of 1936, Leslie Carruthers, a fellow supporter of the League of Nations, wrote that Noel-Baker was 'almost alone in the PLP [to] have handled with sincerity and courage the British policy in Spain'.³⁹ Noel-Baker confessed to the former Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd-George that he had 'obsessed day and night' about the fate of the Republic.⁴⁰ Indeed, the influential commentator 'Ignotus' (the one-time editor of the *Observer*, James Louis Garvin) criticised him for speaking 'too much in Parliament. It is monotonous to find the same persons chattering day after day.' Noel-Baker campaigned in favour of the Spanish Republic with several international organizations but his most committed efforts could be seen in the House of Commons. In this, he was encouraged by the journalist George Steer to make as much fuss in parliament as possible to shame the British government into modifying its covertly pro-Franco policy.⁴¹ Their collaboration was intense during the Francoist assault on Vizcaya.

Linked by their mutual loathing of fascism, Noel-Baker and Steer combined to put pressure on the British government to stop favouring Franco's conquest of Vizcaya. They had been in touch since Steer was a student at Oxford.⁴² Now, they communicated via 'letters and telegrams almost every day' in a collaboration aimed at shaming Stanley Baldwin's Conservative Whitehall into changing its naval policy and allowing the Royal Navy to protect

³⁸ Lewis H. Mates, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Left. Political Activism and the Popular Front* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007) pp. 61-75, 91-6; Tom Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) pp. 29-30, 167-73.

³⁹ Leslie Carruthers to Noel-Baker, 25 Nov. 1936, Noel-Baker Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge (henceforth CAC-NBKR), CAC, NBKR, 4/656.

⁴⁰ Noel-Baker to Lloyd-George, 13 May 1937, CAC, NBKR, 4/660.

⁴¹ Steer to Noel-Baker, 31 May 1937, CAC, NBKR, 4X/118; Noel-Baker to Indalecio Prieto, 13 May 1937, CAC, NBKR, 4/660.

⁴² Tom Buchanan, *The Impact of the Spanish Civil War on Britain. War, Loss and Memory* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2007) pp. 25, 27, 31.

British ships in Spanish waters. In different ways, Noel-Baker in Parliament and Steer in the press, contributed to international outrage both before and after the bombing of Gernika. Their efforts on behalf of refugees would impel a reluctant British government to permit asylum being given to 4,000 children.⁴³ To strengthen the impact of the information being fed to Noel-Baker, Steer told him: ‘Don’t use my name except in private. Describe me as an observer in Bilbao.’ He was concerned not to be seen as a mouthpiece for the Basque Government⁴⁴

On 31 March, the day before his opening offensive, General Mola had made his notorious broadcast from Vitoria aimed at spreading mass fear with a proclamation that was also printed in a leaflet dropped on the main towns: ‘If your submission is not immediate, I will raze Vizcaya to the ground, beginning with the industries of war. I have ample means to do so’.⁴⁵ Over the next three months, Noel-Baker and Steer worked together to counter Mola’s notorious threat. Noel-Baker’s performances in parliament were largely scripted by Steer. This was acknowledged when he wrote: ‘your magnificent dispatches have had a great effect. I have never known such good journalistic work’ and confessed that, with Steer’s information, ‘I have tried to make trouble of every kind’.⁴⁶

Their first triumph would be in regard to the supply of food to Bilbao. Needless to say, they did not do this alone. Noel-Baker’s efforts were merely the most important part of a campaign mounted by Liberal and Labour M.P.s. On 12 April, Sir Archibald Sinclair, the leader of the Liberal Party, asked in the House of Commons what the government proposed to do to prevent interference with British shipping to Bilbao. The Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin responded that since Bilbao was very close to the war zone there was a constant threat to shipping from bombs, from aircraft and from mines laid by both sides in the approaches to the port. Baldwin was effectively relying on the unsubstantiated reports from the pro-Franco Chilton which he, in turn, had received from Troncoso. Accordingly, Baldwin declared that the Government was ‘warning British shipping that, in view of conditions at present prevailing in the neighbourhood of Bilbao, they should not, for

⁴³ Noel-Baker to Megan Lloyd-George, 13 May 1937, CAC, NBKR, 4/660.

⁴⁴ Steer to Noel-Baker, 19 April 1937, CAC, NBKR, 4X/118.

⁴⁵ Steer, *The Tree of Gernika*, p. 159; Bowers to Hull, 30 April 1937, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1937* Vol.I (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1954) p. 291; Manuel Aznar, *Historia militar de la guerra de España (1936-1939)* (Madrid: Ediciones Idea, 1940) p. 398. See the press cutting reproduced in Martínez & Mendaza, *1936 Guerra civil en Euskal Herria III*, p. 211.

⁴⁶ Noel-Baker to Steer, 11 & 15 May 1937, CAC, NBKR, 4/660.

practical reasons, and in view of risks against which it is at present impossible to protect them, go into that area so long as those conditions prevail.⁴⁷

Although it was not his intention, Baldwin was effectively saying that the government's advice to merchant ships not to go to Bilbao would apply only as long as it was clear that territorial waters were dangerous. If it could be demonstrated that there was no threat to British shipping within territorial waters, the government's position would no longer be tenable. Steer, Noel-Baker and others, including the Basque President José Antonio Aguirre, set about doing so. In the meanwhile, there was outrage within the parliamentary opposition and considerable swathes of popular opinion that the world's greatest naval power should be seen to be announcing that it was unable to protect British merchantmen. Two days later, Clement Attlee put forward a motion 'That this House, taking note of the statement of the Prime Minister on the situation at Bilbao, deplors the failure of His Majesty's Government to give protection to British merchant ships on their lawful occasions.'⁴⁸

On 14 April, prior to the debate on Attlee's motion, the Cabinet met and again discussed the Basque situation. The Ministers gathered aware of the considerable hostile press to which they had been subjected. Under the headline MR BALDWIN SURRENDERS TO FRANCO'S THREATS, the *News Chronicle* on 13 declared: 'In effect Mr. Baldwin said yesterday: "British ships are to be warned against attempting to carry milk to starving Basque babies because a Spanish pirate has said that he will fire upon them if they do."'⁴⁹ In patriotic mode, the *Daily Herald*, under the strapline 'FRANCO WARNS BRITISH FOODSHIPS, 'KEEP AWAY – OR BE SUNK, asked rhetorically 'Why Have a Navy?'.⁵⁰ The idea that a great sea power that once ruled the waves was giving way to a would-be dictators had an impact on those who would normally shy away from support for the Spanish Republic. Moreover, contrary to Hoare's insinuation that the merchant skippers were sleazy profiteers, David Scott of *The Times* humanised three of them with the nicknames David John 'Potato' Jones of the *Marie Llewellyn*, David 'Ham-and-Egg' Jones of the *Sarastone* and Owen 'Corn-Cob' Jones of the *MacGregor*. 'Potato' Jones endeared himself to the public when he was quoted as saying 'It makes me sick, thinking of these Spanish Dons

⁴⁷ H.C. Deb 12 April 1937 vol. 322, cc.593-9; *Daily Mail*, 12, 13 April; *The Times*, 13 April 1937.

⁴⁸ H.C. Deb, 12 April 1937, vol. 322, cc. 1029-1142.

⁴⁹ *News Chronicle*, 13 April 1937.

⁵⁰ *Daily Herald*, 13 April 1937.

strutting about the quarter-decks of their miserable ships intimidating the British Navy and interfering with shipping.’⁵¹

As the Cabinet met, on the table was a telegram from President Aguirre, probably drafted by Steer and certainly sent on his advice. It explained in detail why the alleged blockade by the Francoists was based largely on bluff and constituted little threat to the safety of merchant shipping. The telegram had been sent both to Whitehall and to Noel-Baker which meant that the information therein was in the hands of the parliamentary opposition. Aguirre pointed out that there were no mines in the approaches to the port of Bilbao laid by either the rebels or the Basques themselves; that in the first two weeks of April there had been twenty six sailings in and out of the port of Bilbao without any incident within territorial waters; that powerful coastal batteries were able to keep the rebel fleet over fifteen miles from the shore and that, on 13 April, the British ship *Olavus* had left Bilbao without incident. Moreover, he reminded the Government of the assistance given by Basque shipping to Great Britain during the Great War.⁵²

In response to the telegram, the ever-sinuous Hoare argued in cabinet that, in the up-coming debate, it would be safer to justify not protecting British shipping in terms of the danger to the policy of Non-Intervention rather than the danger from mines. The Home Secretary, Sir John Simon, who was to lead for the Government in the debate, claimed that there was still a danger from mines. In fact, as James Cable has revealed, the Admiralty had solid information that the entrance to Bilbao was absolutely safe. Moreover, there was a problem arising from the fact that the Prime Minister had stated in the House of Commons on 12 April that His Majesty’s Government ‘cannot tolerate any interference with British shipping at sea’. It was decided that, to avoid embarrassment, it would be necessary to acknowledge that if, despite the Government’s advice, a ship sailing to Bilbao ‘was molested or menaced on the high seas and sent a signal asking for assistance, this should not be withheld’. Eden raised the issue posed by Troncoso’s question to Chilton on 12 April as to the British response if the rebels prevented British ships from entering Spanish territorial waters or fired on them inside the three mile limit’. He proposed replying that he was not prepared to give Franco any

⁵¹ *The Times*, 15, 17, 20 April 1937; Cable, *The Royal Navy*, p. 72; P.M. Heaton, *Welsh Blockade Runners in the Spanish Civil War* (Newport, Gwent: The Starling Press, 1985) p. 39.

⁵² The text of Aguirre’s telegram is Appendix 1, in Cabinet Minutes, 14 April 1937, CAB 23-88, pp. 109-10. See also Jose-Antonio Aguirre to Noel-Baker, 14 April 1937, CAC, NBKR, 4x/118.

undertaking to refrain from protecting British ships.⁵³ In doing so, the government tacitly accepted that there was no real threat to British shipping and that was advising merchant ships not to go to Bilbao simply in the spirit of appeasement.

In the House of Commons, on 14 April, Clement Attlee pointed out that Franco was not recognised as a belligerent and thus had no right in international law to declare a blockade. He went on to declare that the Conservative government's action was friendly to General Franco: 'and it is interesting to see what his response is. General Franco promptly sends out by radio a message that any British ship found in Spanish territorial waters will be seized or sunk. That does not seem to have provoked any response at all from the British Government. But the action of the British Government has provoked a very wide reaction throughout the world. There was widespread amazement that this country should step down from the position that it has always taken with regard to the right of vessels at sea, and there is widespread suspicion that the British Government which is prepared to take action of that kind must be backing General Franco.' Later in the same debate, Noel-Baker declared: 'I believe this is the first time since 1588 that British ships have been menaced by the Spanish fleet. As I listened to the Home Secretary explaining away our naval rights, I thought that the ghosts of Queen Elizabeth and Francis Drake must be stirring uneasily in our midst, as indeed must have been the spirit of Admiral Jellicoe.'

Noel-Baker attacked what he demonstrated as the hypocrisy of the Government.

'In this case there has not been a single case of ships being actually bombed but a mere declaration by General Franco that they may be bombed. Are we going to agree to the indiscriminate laying of mines? We are particularly sorry that it should be at this moment that the British Government are taking a new step in policy, that they are allowing threats of menace by air, mine and ship, which did not move them earlier, to induce them now to prevent British food ships going to Spanish ports. For it comes exactly at moment when the sending of food into Bilbao is a matter of military importance.

Another of those British captains quoted in the "Daily Telegraph" said: I do not think the Basques will surrender unless they are starved. We are sorry that this change should have happened now. The Spanish policy of the Government has not been notable for its luminous

⁵³ Cabinet minutes, 14 April 1937, CAB 23-88, pp. 88-98; Cable, *The Royal Navy*, pp. 68-70.

clarity, but to-day, against the background of its murky obscurity, the Government have flashed out a Franco sign. We know that it is a defeat for the Foreign Secretary. We all agree with what he wants to do. It is with his methods that we do not agree. He spoke the other night of pursuing his purposes patiently and persistently. We are afraid that his policy is all patience and very little persistence. His whole theory in dealing with dictators is that if he treats them gently they may stop intervening. When are the Government going to learn from their own experience?⁵⁴

Other members of the opposition argued powerfully that the policy of the Government amounted to yielding to fascist aggression which, rather than avoiding a general war, was likely to hasten it. Sir Archibald Sinclair commented that the failure of the British Government to protect lawful merchant shipping heading for Bilbao had 'created a feeling bordering on consternation in French Government circles. On the other hand, the Germans and Italians are jubilant. They hail it as a clear sign of weakness. Senator Farinacci, who is a member of the Grand Council of the Fascist party in Italy and one of the leading statesmen of Italy at the present time, declares: The British Government met urgently, with the intention of raising a loud voice against whoever dares to impose any limitation on the Union Jack. Instead, they had to admit that Britain could not defend her own craft in Spanish waters. That is the impression which has been made upon Italy. This is Abyssinia all over again, retreating step by step in the face of the threats of the dictators.'⁵⁵

This point was reinforced by both James Maxton, the Independent Labour Party M.P. for Bridgeton and Colonel Josiah Clement Wedgewood, the Labour M.P. for Newcastle-Under-Lyme. Maxton compared Franco to a pirate. Wedgewood declared: 'The hon. Member for Bridgeton (Mr. Maxton) said rightly that we were feeding the dictators with what they lived upon. Every time England gives way and shows fear we invite a further kick in the pants, and we bring nearer the day of reckoning. The main support of peace to-day is fear of Great Britain, not contempt of Great Britain, and it is because we feel that the measures that were taken at the Cabinet meeting on Friday last were just one more surrender, just one more evidence of weakness, just one more sop to the dictators, that we are moving this Vote of Censure and praying that even now the Government will change their policy and show their

⁵⁴ *Daily Herald*, 13 April 1937; H.C. Deb 14 April 1937, vol. 322 cc.1029-45.

⁵⁵ H.C. Deb 14 April 1937, vol. 322 cc. 1057-61.

teeth. We do not want war; we want to take the only steps possible to prevent war coming.’⁵⁶ The speeches made during the censure debate of 14 April helped change public perception both of Government policy and also of the Basque people. It was constantly reiterated both in Parliament and the press that the Basques were an independent, democratic, predominantly Catholic people who had helped Britain during the Great War and were now facing a humanitarian crisis as a result of the British Government accepting as fact the Francoist boasts of an effective blockade.⁵⁷

The information provided by Steer to Noel-Baker underlay some of the most powerful speeches made by the Labour and Liberal opposition during the debates in Parliament. In addition, the weaknesses of the Government’s position was subjected to fierce forensic analysis by Sir Archibald Sinclair, Clement Attlee, the Labour MP for Hillsborough Albert Alexander and others. The more potent points made in the debates in the House of Commons were echoed in the popular press, particularly the pro-Republican *Daily Herald* and the *News Chronicle*. Reports from Bilbao exposed as false the Government’s insistence on the existence of an effective blockade. Basque officials, including Santiago Aznar, the Basque Minister for Industry, were quoted to the effect that Basque minesweepers ensured that the territorial waters were clear and that coastal artillery kept rebel warships outside the three-mile limit.⁵⁸ Accordingly, the combination of the portraying the Government as cowardly in the face of the dictators, generating sympathy for the plight of the Basques and building up the merchant skippers as heroic seafarers had a significant impact on public opinion. Much was made of the fact that Hewlett Johnson, the ‘red’ Dean of Canterbury sailed from Bilbao to St Jean de Luz without incident.⁵⁹

In fact, as Franco’s naval chief, Admiral Cervera, himself later admitted in his memoirs, an effective blockade of the Cantabrian coast was impossible. To cover 160 nautical miles (184 miles) in extremely inclement weather, he had at his disposal only four armed warships – the recently built but technologically obsolete battleship *España*, the battle cruiser *Almirante Cervera*, the destroyer *Velasco* and the minesweeper *Júpiter*.⁶⁰ The extent to which the Government was hiding behind the farce of Non-Intervention to mask its tacit support for

⁵⁶ H.C. Deb 14 April 1937, vol. 322 cc. 1112-13.

⁵⁷ H.C. Deb 14 April 1937, vol. 322 cc. 1060-1; *News Chronicle*, 13, 14 April 1937.

⁵⁸ *Daily Herald*, 14 April, *News Chronicle*, 14, 18 1937.

⁵⁹ *News Chronicle*, 12 April, *Evening Standard*, 15 April 1937.

⁶⁰ Cervera Valderrama, *Memorias de Guerra*, pp. 135-7.

Franco was revealed by the pusillanimous gesture of sending a deputation to negotiate with Franco. ‘The Burgos authorities will be asked to accept the good faith of the British Government as shown by its instructions to merchant ship owners not to enter into any further charters for Spanish ports’.⁶¹

Aguirre’s declaration that there was no danger to British ships because the entrance to Bilbao was not mined and that rebel ships were not in control of Basque territorial waters was not forwarded by the British Government to the Royal Navy ships in the area. This despite the fact that it was reported in the press and discussed in parliament.⁶² Moreover, the failure of British merchant ships to reach Bilbao was because the Royal Navy was actively trying to dissuade captains from breaking the blockade. David ‘Potato’ Jones, captain of the **Marie Llewellyn**, was told by the captain of the British destroyer that escorted his ship back to St. Jean-de-Luz that ‘other high authorities besides those of Salamanca disapprove of blockade-running’. As a result, with his cargo rotting, he left St Jean de Luz on 17 April. In the meanwhile, he had been portrayed in *The Times* on 17 April as an heroic sea-dog rather than the profiteering blockade runner of government rhetoric. This would add fuel to the flames of public opinion disgusted with the Conservative Government. In parliament, Sir Samuel Hoare was severely taken to task over the incident by David Lloyd George.⁶³

On 19 April, writing from the Basque Government offices, Steer sent a telegram to Noel-Baker, exposing what was effectively Cervera’s bluff: ‘Coastal defences of Bilbao are as follows: five batteries heavy artillery mostly Vickers six-inch 1936. Range 15 miles beautifully placed; destroyers, submarine and armed trawlers, bombing aircraft at aerodrome near coast.’ He showed that the blockade did not exist in any meaningful way ‘for any power prepared to protect its shipping outside Spanish territorial waters’. He went on: ‘Everybody here from [the] Consul downward knows that there is not slightest danger and that [the] blockade [is] made out of paper and exists only in [the] hopes [of] Salamanca [and the] imagination [of] Whitehall’. He reported that Basque mine-sweepers had ensured that the approaches to Bilbao were not mined. He further pointed out that Basque batteries of naval artillery with a fifteen-mile range were keeping the Nationalists at bay. In the light of his information, he stated that it was ‘Quite impossible for Franco’s few ships to come within ten

⁶¹ *Daily Mail*, 14 April 1937.

⁶² *Daily Herald*, 14 April 1937; Steer, *Gernika*, pp. 196-7.

⁶³ *The Times*, 17, 19 April 1937; H.C. Deb, 20 April 1937, vol. 322 cc. 1680-5.

miles of territorial waters.’ Although clearly an exaggeration in the light of various incidents involving Royal Navy vessels, Steer’s comment was broadly true.⁶⁴

This information was repeated in an article that appeared in *The Times* on the following day. Steer recounted that Ralph Stevenson, the British Consul, had visited the Presidency on Saturday 17 April and been given a full account of Basque measures for the protection of merchant shipping within the three-mile limit: ‘Five batteries of coastal artillery, mostly heavy guns are placed on either side of the mouth of the River Nervión in positions high above the sea. There are coastal survey aeroplanes to reconnoitre for ships entering and leaving. There is complete freedom from mines both inside and well outside territorial waters. This is ensured every night by searchlights on either side of the Nervión and patrol boats varying from three at full moon to six at new moon. Every day 16 minesweepers sweep the whole bay and well outside territorial waters. These measures have prevented mine-laying by the insurgents since January 17. On the high seas, Bilbao can set two destroyers, one submarine, and half a dozen armed trawlers against the battleship *España* and four armed trawlers occasionally supplemented by the cruiser *Almirante Cervera*. Still more trawlers are being armed here. The Consul was informed that the blockade was no more severe than it had been during the last six months, that no merchant ship had yet been sunk, mined, shot at, or molested in the territorial waters around Bilbao, and that the Basque Government could not do more than repeat their guarantee that British shipping was safe in their territorial waters.’ Thus, Noel-Baker and therefore Attlee with whom he was in close touch, not to mention readers of *The Times*, were in possession of proof that the government was misleading the ships both of the Royal Navy and the merchant marine.⁶⁵

Then, on the night of 19 April, the S.S. *Seven Seas Spray* left St Jean de Luz. Ten miles off the Basque coast, it was met by a British destroyer which signalled the Captain, William Roberts, that he entered Bilbao at his own risk and wished him good luck. On the morning of 20 April, Steer went out on a Basque trawler to meet the *Seven Seas Spray*, the first British ship successfully to run the gauntlet and he was aboard as it made a triumphal passage down the nine miles of the River Nervión that lead to Bilbao. His moving account of the cheering crowds helped lead eventually to Royal Navy ships escorting subsequent food convoys. The

⁶⁴ CAC, NBKR 4x/118

⁶⁵ Steer to Noel Baker, 19 April 1937, Noel-Baker Papers, CAC, NBKR, 4x/118; *The Times*, 20 April 1937.

British Government was forced to admit its mistake in claiming that the approaches to Bilbao were mined and issued instructions to the Royal Navy to protect British merchant shipping.⁶⁶

On the evening of 20 April, this information was used to great effect in the House of Commons by Albert Alexander, stressing that the blockade, owed to the British government any effectiveness that it might have. He reminded the House that, on the previous day, the First Lord of the Admiralty (Hoare) had said: ‘The reports which have been received from the Vice-Admiral Commanding Battle Cruiser Squadron, in His Majesty’s Ship ‘Hood’, read together with the reports received from the other authorities concerned, have confirmed the view that the Spanish insurgent authorities have established an effective de facto blockade of Bilbao. In that debate on 19 April, tempers had risen. Sir Archibald Sinclair asked Eden ‘whether General Franco notified His Majesty’s Ambassador at Hendaye that he would resist by force attempts to break his blockade of Bilbao whatever the consequences might be; and on what date this message was received in London?’ When Eden replied: ‘The Military Governor of Irun, acting on instructions from General Franco, informed Sir Henry Chilton on the evening of 9th April that the entrance into Bilbao of four British ships known to be lying in St. Jean de Luz would be resisted by insurgent warships. This information was received in London on the morning of 10th April.’ According to the *The Times*, Sir Archibald Sinclair was ‘white with indignation’ at Eden’s admission.⁶⁷

Now on 20 April, Alexander, with devastating impact, read out Steer’s telegram to Noel-Baker: ‘I personally accompanied the ‘Seven Seas Spray’ into harbour 8.30 this morning. She left France suddenly 10 o’clock last night. Captain was semaphored frantically from shore to stop but he turned blind eye. Voyage completely uneventful. Captain’s 20-year-old Fifi slept like a top. Only incident was one British destroyer patrolling the Basque coast about 10 miles to sea feebly attempted to enforce imaginary blockade, warning Captain Roberts that he proceeded at his own risk. Roberts answered ‘I accept full responsibility.’ Destroyer wished him good luck and sheered off. No insurgent ship was ever sighted. Bilbao’s destroyers and armed trawlers went out to meet the ‘Seven Seas Spray’ which, since there are no mines in Bilbao territorial waters, was able to enter the harbour without a pilot. Large force fighting planes circled overhead. As boat slowly moved up river with captain and daughter on the

⁶⁶ *The Times*, 15, 21, 24 April 1937; Heaton, *Welsh Blockade Runners*, pp. 35-54; Cable, *The Royal Navy*, pp.55-76; Steer, *Gernika*, pp. 190-4; Rankin, *Telegram*, pp.1 05-8.

⁶⁷ H.C. Deb, 19 April 1937, vol. 322, cc. 1410-11, 1441.

bridge huge crowds cheered, waved handkerchiefs and shouted Vivas for the English sailors and for Liberty.’⁶⁸

During that debate on 20 April, Sir Samuel Hoare was still arguing that the approaches to Bilbao were mined. In attempting to defend the Government’s position, Hoare was asked by Colonel Wedgewood where the Government got the information on which its policy regarding the Basque Country. Hoare replied: ‘Our informants are the British Ambassador, our Consular agents and the naval authorities.’ Clement Attlee leapt on this to ask Hoare: ‘Will the right hon. Gentleman make plain where our Ambassador, who is not living in Spain, gets his information from?’ Hoare revealed perhaps more than he intended when he responded: ‘As the right hon. Gentleman knows, there is only a bridge between him and Spain, and we have during all these months received a considerable volume of information from him.’⁶⁹ It was an inadvertent admission that Government policy was being made on the basis of information supplied by Major Troncoso.

A greatly effective device used by members of the parliamentary opposition was to argue in jingoistic terms that the Government’s policy towards Franco was undermining British prestige. Albert Alexander had taken this line during the 20 April debate. ‘I am convinced’, he said, ‘that, if a Labour Government had been in office, and had adopted a similar form of action in regard to a blockade of the ports of a Government more in tune with the political views of right hon. Gentlemen opposite, and if we had thereupon refused the effective protection of the British Navy for ships flying the British flag and attempting to get to those ports, every one of them would not only have demanded that the Labour Government in such circumstances should be asked to change their policy, but would have denounced them as enemies of their country, as cowards who would not defend their own kith and kin, as improvident statesmen who would not even have the sense to protect British commercial interests in the future, and would have demanded immediately the resignation of the Labour Government.’ He went on to declare vehemently: ‘Over and over again in the course of the foreign policy of this Government I have observed an attitude which convinces me that when questions arise which affect the safety of the British Commonwealth, the passage of the sea routes of the Empire, the whole future position of the nations gathered together within that

⁶⁸ H.C. Deb, 20 April 1937, vol. 322, cc. 1653-62.

⁶⁹ H.C. Deb 20 April 1937, vol. 322, cc. 1670-1682.

Empire—over and over again they adopt a policy which is prejudicial because they are afraid of even appearing to give any support to policies of the Left.’⁷⁰

The questioning of the government by Albert Alexander, David Lloyd George and others, using information in Steer’s telegrams and in much of the press, pushed the Cabinet into changing its position. On the following day, the Cabinet again discussed, ‘in the light of the latest information and of a Debate in Parliament on the previous evening, the question of the advice to ship-owners as to voyages to Bilbao, Santander and Gijon.’ Moreover, it was necessary to deal with a message from the United Kingdom Chamber of Shipping, which considered that there was no effective blockade and that the Government’s advice to ships not to attempt to enter Bilbao ‘involved a breach of warranty and invalidated insurance policies in respect of voyages to Bilbao.’ Eden, clearly influenced by the opposition and the press, admitted that ‘the degree of warning was excessive in present circumstances, and in that event the notices to shipping might have to be altered’. Hoare was reluctant to amend the advice to shipping. In the end, it was decided ‘That the policy of the Government, namely, to afford protection to British shipping on the high seas but not in territorial waters, should not be changed., but that notices to shipping and instructions to the Naval Commander-in-Chief must depend, upon the facts of the situation, which were liable to vary from day to day.’⁷¹

Nevertheless, in the wake of the success of the S.S. *Seven Seas Spray*, it became clear that the British Government had been obliged to reverse its position on protection for British shipping.⁷² On 22 April, under the headline BALDWIN’S BLOCKADE, the *Daily Herald* published a stark challenge to the Government by declaring that, if advice to merchant shipping not to go to Bilbao was not withdrawn, it would be clear that the Cabinet was effectively helping the insurgents: ‘There has never been a blockade by General Franco. There has been a virtual blockade by Mr. Baldwin.’⁷³ That the press and the speeches of the parliamentary opposition had considerable effect was made starkly clear on 23 April.

Three British ships carrying 8,500 tons of food, the *Hamsterley*, the *Macgregor* and the *Stanbrook* left St Jean de Luz for Bilbao. Moreover, the captains of a further three ships notified Vice-Admiral Geoffrey Blake that they also intended to sail for Bilbao.

⁷⁰ H.C. Deb 20 April 1937, vol. 322, cc. 1651-4.

⁷¹ Cabinet minutes, 21 April 1937, CAB 23-88, pp. 123-6.

⁷² Noel-Baker to Steer, 23 April 1937, CAC, NBKR, 4/660.

⁷³ *Daily Herald*, 22 April 1937.

Accordingly, Admiral Blake signalled to the Admiralty '*H.M.S. Hood* will be there', meaning that, while not offering direct escort for the food convey, he would keep his ship in the area lest they encounter problems with rebel warships. The *Almirante Cervera* and the armed trawler *Galerna* stopped the lead ship of the convoy, the *MacGregor*. The captain David 'Corn Cob' Jones signalled for assistance, and was joined by *HMS Firedrake*, one of two destroyers sailing with *HMS Hood*. The captain of the *Almirante Cervera* demanded that the British warships leave on the grounds that they were in the six-mile limit that the rebels claimed as territorial waters. Despite the overwhelming superiority of the British flotilla, the *Galerna* fired across the bows of *SS MacGregor*.

Admiral Blake decided to intervene and signalled *MacGregor* to continue on to Bilbao. The captain of the *Almirante Cervera* responded by aiming his guns at the British warships. Blake ordered *Hood's* own guns to be ranged against the rebel battle-cruiser as a warning. He signalled that he would open fire if the Spanish ships did not leave which they did. The *Galerna* then entered Basque territorial waters and was driven off by the coastal batteries. The convoy was then escorted to Bilbao by Basque armed trawlers.⁷⁴ On Sunday 25 April, two more British merchant vessels, *SS Thurston* and the *SS Stesso* reached Bilbao with food cargos. Over the next few days, they were followed by the *Sheaf Garth*, the *Backworth*, the *Sheaf Field*, the *Thorpehall*, the *Marvia*, the *Portelet*.⁷⁵

In response, Franco's brother Nicolás sent Troncoso to protest to Chilton. He reported that, an incandescent Troncoso made the absurd threat that 'if we wanted war, we could have it. He then went on to say that General Franco would stop all commerce with Great Britain if our attitude was persisted in. He added that commanding officer of *Admiral Cervera* had attempted suicide from mortification.' Troncoso demanded that Franco's Spain be afforded belligerent rights and also the extension of territorial waters to six miles. There could be no question of belligerent rights. Eden discussed this in cabinet on 28 April stating that 'If belligerent rights were granted, our ships could be stopped on the high seas, taken into Spanish ports for search, and all commerce with Spain would come to an end. If we did it alone a difficult Parliamentary situation would be created.' Accordingly, Eden replied to

⁷⁴ *The Times*, 24 April, *Daily Mail*, 1937; Steer, *Gernika*, pp. 206-09; Cable, *The Royal Navy*, pp. 76, 87-90; Cervera Valderrama, *Memorias*, pp. 145-6; Michael Alpert, *La guerra civil española en el mar* (Madrid: Siglo XX, 1987) pp. 255-7.

⁷⁵ H.C. Deb 26 April 1937 vol. 323, cc. 11-12, 28 April 1937 vol. 323 cc. 312-9; Heaton, *Welsh Blockade Runners*, pp. 47-8; Alpert, *La guerra civil española en el mar*, pp. 257-8.

Chilton on 28 April, instructing him to inform Troncoso that British policy ‘is to the effect that whilst unable to advise British shipping to enter Bilbao they are determined, in the event of British ships ignoring the warning, to give them full protection on the high seas if called upon to do so.’⁷⁶

An ironic sequel to the issue of the mining of the approaches to Bilbao took place on 30 April. Shortly after 8.15 a.m., while attempting to intercept a British merchant ship, the *SS Knitsley*, going to Bilbao to pick up iron ore, the Spanish destroyer *Velasco* received a distress signal from the battleship *España*. The crew of the *Knitsley* witnessed the destroyer going alongside the *España*. Shortly afterwards, the battleship listed to port before turning over and sinking stern first. The *España* sank as a result of hitting a mine which had broken free of its moorings, a mine laid by the rebels themselves. Needless to say, the Francoist authorities denied that this had been the case. There was speculation that the warship had been sunk as a result of being bombed by a Republican aircraft. However, an investigation by the British Admiralty, alarmed at the prospect of airborne attacks on its vessels, concluded that the *España* had indeed been sunk by a mine.⁷⁷

Throughout May and June Noel-Baker and Steer continued to apply diplomatic and political pressure to help give the Basques the best possible chance of resisting Franco’s forces. In the month and a half after the bombing of Gernika, they went to great lengths, with professional and personal risks, to prevent a Nationalist victory. Their principal efforts were directed towards trying to get aircraft for the Basque forces. The biggest single weakness of Basque defence was the absence of adequate air cover over Bilbao to combat the overwhelming strength of the Condor Legion and the Aviazione Legionaria. On 8 May, Steer wrote to Noel-Baker that ‘the depression of the militia [is] due most of all to the entire absence of aviation on our side.’ Promises by the Valencia government to send aircraft to Bilbao came to nothing in part because of the crisis that broke out on 3 May in Barcelona. In his 8 May letter, Steer implored Noel-Baker to ‘do your utmost to see that planes of some sort arrive. The only way it can be done is through the French, through Pierre Cot, with French planes.’⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Chilton to Eden, 26 April; Eden to Chilton, 28 April 1937, FO371/21353, W8187/23/41; Cabinet minutes, 28 April 1937, CAB 23-88, pp. 139-43.

⁷⁷ Alpert, *La guerra civil española en el mar*, pp. 259-60; Gerald Howson, *Aircraft of the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (London: Putnam, 1990) p. 160. The issue was discussed in parliament on 5 and 26 May. See HC Deb 5 May 1937 vol. 323, cc.1135-7; HC Deb 26 May 1937 vol. 324, cc.256-7.

⁷⁸ Steer to Noel-Baker, 8 May 1937, CAC, NBKR, 4X/118; Noel-Baker to Lloyd-George, 13 May 1937, CAC, NBKR, 4/660.

In fact, on that day, fifteen Spanish Republican aircraft had landed at the Air-France airfield at Montaudran outside Toulouse. They were en route from Catalonia to the Basque Country. It was expected that sympathetic socialist employees of Air France would refuel them. In fact, under pressure from the Non-Intervention Patrol Commission inspectors, they were obliged to return to Lérida on the following day escorted by a squadron of the French air force.⁷⁹ In response, an indignant Steer, recalling that, in 1936, Pierre Cot, as the French Minister of Aviation, had covertly supplied the Republican forces with sixty aircraft, tried once more to mobilise Noel-Baker who had close relations with Cot through their collaboration in the League of Nations. Declaring himself ‘angered by French cowardice’, Steer wrote sarcastically: ‘I hope you’ll be able to congratulate on my behalf Pierre Cot for the stoppage of the Spanish government planes at Toulouse. The fact that no planes can now come to Bilbao means that the town will be taken, Madrid will be next, then the whole of Spain. ... France will be the next place for the Fascist conspiracy, and Cot himself the next man for the high jump. If he acts with coolness and decision now he can turn defeat into victory.’ Noel-Baker could do nothing and nor could Cot who was under pressure from his prime minister Leon Blum to conform to Non-Intervention rules. In consequence, he wrote to Lloyd-George that the resulting demoralisation of Basque troops ‘led to the abandonment of very good strategic positions’.⁸⁰ Lloyd-George felt that Cot was not to blame, describing him as ‘the only man in the present French Ministry who is worth a dime.’⁸¹ On 17 May, the Valencia government tried again, this time sending thirty-five aircraft from Lérida. Because of bad weather, half were forced to return to base and only seventeen reached Toulouse. The result was virtually the same. The French government gave permission for them to proceed to Bilbao after first removing their machine guns. The Valencia government decided that this was pointless and ordered them to return to Lérida. The Republican government therefore made the decision to send aircraft via the direct, and more dangerous, route over Francoist territory. Insufficient to start with, the losses suffered en route ensured that not enough aircraft arrived.⁸² Reflecting the desperate situation, Steer wrote that ‘the fall of Bilbao is more than probable if new material does not arrive.’⁸³ It took a little longer than he had

⁷⁹ Ramón Salas Larrazábal, *Historia del Ejército popular de la República* 4 vols (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1973) II, p. 1381; Pike, *La Galia Dividida*, p. 255; Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, p. 680.

⁸⁰ Steer to Noel-Baker, 9 May 1937, CAC, NBKR, 4X/118; Noel-Baker to Archibald Sinclair, 10 May 1937, CAC, NBKR, 4/660; Noel-Baker to Lloyd-George, 13 May 1937, CAC, NBKR, 4/660.

⁸¹ Lloyd-George to Noel-Baker, 14 May 1937, CAC, NBKR, 4/660.

⁸² Salas Larrazábal, *Historia del Ejército popular*, II, pp. 1381-4.

⁸³ Steer to Noel-Baker, 31 May 1937, CAC, NBKR, 4X/122.

feared but Franco's forces had penetrated Bilbao's so-called 'Iron Ring' on 12 June and entered the city one week later. The British government no longer had to manifest concern over such Francoist blockade as might have existed.