

To what extent was the French pursuit of non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War due to domestic political reasons?

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Section 1 – Identification and Evaluation of sources

The research question examined is: ‘To what extent was the French pursuit of non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War due to domestic political reasons?’ Non-intervention was a controversial policy for France at the time and has been criticized by historians subsequently. However, the situation was complex, with both domestic and foreign pressure on Leon Blum’s government.

Antony Beever's book “The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939” written in 2006 is relevant to this investigation as it gives an expert in-depth analysis of the Civil War. A value of the origin is Beever is a British military historian and an expert on this specific period and, has authored several critically acclaimed works.¹ Another value is that it was published in 2006, and thus benefits from hindsight. The purpose of Beever’s book is to analyze all aspects of the war and as an academic work may attempt objectivity. Beever’s citations demonstrate that his analysis was based on extensive research including Spanish sources, foreign archives, government documents and interviews, which adds credibility to the content.² Another value of the content is that Beever added new evidence to a revised edition of a book he wrote in 1982, which implies that he has improved his analysis. A limitation of the origin is that as a historian that focuses on the cause of war, Beever does not expand in-depth on the French position in the interwar period. A limitation of the purpose is that as the title suggests it is not specifically focused on the reasons for non-intervention. Finally, a limitation of the content is the dramatic tone that is used, such as the phrase ‘a pathologically vicious war’.³

The French Prime Minister Leon Blum’s speech to the House of Representatives on 6th December 1936 is relevant to the research question as it offers insight into the French government’s explanation for the policy at the time. A value of the origin is that the speech is delivered by Blum himself, the Prime Minister from 4 June 1936 to 22 June 1937 and was the Chief executive of French Foreign policy. It provides an insight into the views of the most important figure in France as well as insight into the government’s rationale at the time. A value of the purpose is that it sets down the justifications for non-intervention to a knowledgeable political audience. The rationale could be challenged in parliament. A limitation of the origin is that as Prime Minister, Blum would not make public information that would undermine his position and government. Its purpose was to persuade parliament to support the policy and it therefore would not reveal if Blum had responded to external pressure. The content may also be limited by its polemic intent and the language and tone being persuasive.

¹ "Antony Beever: Biography," Antony Beever, last modified 2016, accessed September 4, 2016, <http://www.antonybeever.com/biography/>

² "Antony Beever," Antony Beever.

³ Piers Brendon, "The Beevorised Version," review of *The Battle for Spain*, by Antony Beevor, *The Guardian*, last modified 2006, accessed September 8, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jun/24/featuresreviews.guardianreview4>

Section 2 – Investigation

Foreign intervention played a major role in determining the outcome of the Spanish Civil War of 1936 - 1939. France was one of the countries that had initially supported the Republic, however it ultimately decided to pursue non-intervention. Leon Blum, the Prime Minister had stated in a speech to the House of Representatives in December 1936, the ‘establishment in Spain of a military dictatorship closely bound to ... Germany and Italy would represent an attack on French security.’⁴ However, France went on to pursue a policy of non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War and this essay will explore the reasons for this policy. Firstly, the domestic political situation in France is considered, secondly the role of domestic economic problems and finally the role played by Britain in fostering French non-intervention will be assessed.

It could be argued that the main reason France pursued non-intervention was due to internal political divisions. The Popular Front regime was fragile. There had been riots by right-wing groups across France in February 1934, which had led to widespread disruption.⁵ The riots led to the resignation of the President of the council, Édouard Daladier on 9 February 1934 and the formation of a new government, constituting mainly of right-wing parliamentary figures.⁶ These events led to radicalization on the right as well as more unity between left wing parties.⁷ There was significant division on the left within the Popular Front government and this was a factor in the decision to pursue non-intervention. Foreign policy decision-making was problematic due, according to historian Michael Alpert, to divisions in the French Cabinet that were deep-seated.⁸ Yvon Delbos, a Radical-Socialist Party politician, demanded a policy of non-intervention while the Socialists, including Vincent Auriol and Roger Salengro, were against non-intervention.⁹ The radicals were also divided, Pierre Cot, Jean Zay and Alphonse Gasnier-Duparc (Navy Minister), wanted military action while Delbos, Édouard Daladier and Vice-Premier Camille Chautemps supported non-intervention.¹⁰ The issue was highly inflammatory and destabilized the Popular Front Government. There was also division on how to bolster the Popular Front government in Spain and prevent the success of the Nationalists that would create a ‘pro-fascist Spain’.¹¹ The pro-interventionists lost the debate due to the influence of the Senate. The Senate feared the ‘masses’ of anarchists, communists and socialists who

⁴ Leon Blum, "Foreign Policy for Spanish Civil War," speech presented at House of Representatives, December 6, 1936, Spartacus Educational, last modified 1977 - 2016, accessed May 2, 2016, <http://spartacus-educational.com/2WWblum.htm>

⁵ Alfred Sauvy, "The Economic Crisis of the 1930s in France," in *The Great Depression*, vol. 4, *Journal of Contemporary History* (n.p.: Sage Publications, 1969), 23, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/259834>

⁶ "Introduction: la France en 1936," Archives départementales du Tarn, last modified 2016, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://archives.tarn.fr/index.php?id=1321>

⁷ Gunther, John (1936). *Inside Europe*. Harper & Brothers. p. 149

⁸ Michael Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War*, second ed. (New York, NY: Michael Alpert, 1994), 46.

⁹ Alpert, *A new International History of the Spanish Civil War*, 46

¹⁰ Alpert, *A new International History of the Spanish Civil War*, 46

¹¹ Lannon, Frances. *The Spanish Civil War*. Vol. 37 of *Essential Histories*. Oxford, GB: Osprey Publishing, 2002, 38

might triumph in Barcelona and Madrid and the impact a radicalized left wing victory in Spain would have on France.¹² Thus the Senate supported a non-intervention policy.

In addition, the political French press had a role in Blum's decision to pursue non-intervention. José Giral, the leader of the Republicans in Spain, sent an urgent message asking Blum to send help in terms of supplies.¹³ At first Blum was willing to send planes and ordered them on 21st July 1936.¹⁴ However his commitment was undermined when the French right-wing press condemned the move. After the press was again ferociously critical about Blum's subsequent authorization of military aid on 1st and 3rd August, Blum backtracked and proposed to Britain, France and Italy an agreement to prevent foreign intervention in Spain. When England heard this news, it threatened to break its allegiance to France if Blum's attitude did not change.¹⁵ Blum, under constant pressure from the Radical party who represented a large proportion of the middle class within the Popular Front alliance was compromised by the politically tense situation.¹⁶

Furthermore, Blum himself was a pacifist and this political stance contributed to his decision to pursue non-intervention. In his speech to the House of Representatives on December 6th, 1936, he explained that his foreign policy had been inspired by two concepts 'the determination to place France's interests above all others, and the conviction that France has no greater interest than that of peace.'¹⁷ Blum aimed to ensure peace was maintained in Europe and was hesitant when it came to taking any form of military action. He was also concerned that the conflict would escalate and engulf the rest of Europe.¹⁸ As historian Burnett Bolloten argues, 'Blum was a pacifist, afraid to endanger the peace of Europe', and it was Blum that ensured that the initiative for nonintervention came from his own cabinet.¹⁹

However, the economic situation in France also meant it could not shoulder the cost of military intervention in Spain. The effects of the Great Depression were felt in France from 1934. The global crisis led to hyperinflation and, for the first time, prices in France were higher than Britain by 20%.²⁰ Production dropped by 10% in early 1931, and industrial production fell at a rate of more than 25%.²¹ Unemployment increased and agricultural prices collapsed.²² The index of industrial production, which had reached a maximum of 91 in June, fell back to 87 in December of 1933.²³ The Great Depression also

¹² David Wingeate Pike, *Les Français Et La Guerre D'Espagne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1975), 65

¹³ Lannon, *The Spanish Civil War*, 37

¹⁴ Lannon, *The Spanish Civil War*, 37

¹⁵ Pike, *Les Français*, 65.

¹⁶ Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Revolution: The Left and the Struggle for Power during the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 162

¹⁷ Blum, "Foreign Policy for Spanish," speech, Spartacus Educational

¹⁸ David Drake, *French Intellectuals and Politics from the Dreyfus Affair to the Occupation*, ed. Robert Elgie (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 137

¹⁹ Bolloten, *The Spanish*, 162

²⁰ Sauvy, "The Economic," in *The Great*, 24

²¹ Sauvy, "The Economic," in *The Great*, 22

²² Julian Jackson, *The Politics of Depression in France, 1932-1936* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 29.

²³ Sauvy, "The Economic," in *The Great*, 22

affected the mood of French civilians and led to more strikes and riots. When the first ballot opened on April 26th 1936, for the French General Elections, a serious financial crisis began. It carried on into the first week of May. Additionally, the flight from the franc and the export of gold took on “alarming proportions”.²⁴ Leon Blum, who at the time did not have any official Government position, was expected to address the crisis.²⁵ On May 29th 70,000 men went on strike in Paris and by June 3rd 1936 there were 350,000 on strike. The strike was over wages, working hours, and health provision.²⁶ This ongoing economic crisis meant Blum had to focus on the domestic situation; he could not be drawn into complex and costly foreign affairs. In his speech on June 6th 1936, he declared that ‘from next week, the Chamber will draw up reforms to redress the workers’ grievances.’²⁷ These reforms would include an amnesty, a 40-hour week, collective contracts and paid leave.²⁸ The economic crisis put pressure on French capitalism, its democracy, and forced a shift in Blum’s politics.²⁹ Blum had to pursue non-intervention as the economic crisis meant he could not afford a major military commitment.

Nevertheless, the role of France’s key ally, Britain, in its decision was also important. Britain used its influence to pressure France into maintaining its non-interventionist policy. Historian Paul Preston highlighted the power Britain had by arguing that when the Nazi – Polish non-aggression pact of 1934 divided the French network of alliances in Eastern Europe, France was obligated to rely almost completely on British support.³⁰ The dread of losing this support was enough to incline France towards non-intervention once the official British position became clear.³¹ Britain’s position had become clear when Blum visited London on 23rd July 1936, and met with Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, to discuss intervention in Spain.³² The British disapproved greatly of France agreeing to send military aid to Madrid and urged them to adopt a policy of non-intervention.³³ The British Foreign Office also feared that the conflict in Spain might escalate and therefore warned the French government that aiding the Republic would ‘encourage Hitler and Mussolini to aid the nationalists’.³⁴

²⁴ Dietmar Rothermund, *The Global Impact of the Great Depression, 1929-1939* (London, UK: Routledge, 1996), 70

²⁵ Alexander Werth, *The Twilight of France, 1933-1940*, ed. D. W. Brogan, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), 85

²⁶ Werth, *The Twilight of France*, 92

²⁷ Léon Blum, "Nous Sommes un Gouvernement de Front Populaire," speech presented at devant la Chambre, France, June 6, 1936, *Assemblée Nationale*, accessed May 2, 2016, <http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/decouvrir-l-assemblee/histoire/grands-moments-d-eloquence/leon-blum-1936-nous-sommes-un-gouvernement-de-front-populaire-6-juin-1936>

²⁸ Blum, "Nous Sommes," speech, *Assemblée Nationale*

²⁹ Dan La Botz, "The Popular Front, a Social and Political Tragedy: The Case of France," *New Politics*, last modified 2011, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://newpol.org/content/popular-front-social-and-political-tragedy-case-france>.

³⁰ Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 107

³¹ Paul Preston, *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War* (London, UK: Fontana Press, 1996), 102

³² M. D. Gallagher, *Leon Blum and the Spanish Civil War*, vol. 6, *Journal of Contemporary History* (n.p.: Sage Publications, n.d.), 57.

³³ Pike, *Les Français Et La Guerre*, 65

³⁴ Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (London, UK: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006), 610.

Before leaving to go back to France, Blum was given a warning from Eden against sending military aid to Spain, Eden implored Blum 'to be careful'.³⁵ In addition, some historians claim that Baldwin also spoke to Blum, and emphasized that the British Government's view was that any assistance to Spain from France would lead to an international crisis.³⁶ Thus, British pressure meant that Blum had to continue to pursue a policy of non-intervention.

In conclusion, France decided to pursue a policy of non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War mainly because of its domestic political division, and Blum's own pacifism. The context of the economic crisis was also an important factor, as France could not bear the burden of a costly commitment. However, the influence of their main ally, Britain consolidated the French position and ensured the policy would endure for the duration of the war.

³⁵Gallagher, Leon Blum, 58.

³⁶ Gallagher, Leon Blum, 58.

Section 3 - Reflection

This investigation has allowed me to explore the methods and challenges faced by historians. A challenge I had while gathering evidence was finding secondary sources on the specific topic of French non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War. The majority of the most respected works were focused on the war as a whole such as Antony Beevor's *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939*.³⁷ This meant finding authentic historiography on the topic was initially difficult. In addition, the historians writing on the role of foreign intervention tended to be critical of the policy and this may be due to a degree of hindsight bias. The broader context of Franco's victory and the role of the civil war as a cause of the Second World War may influence opinion on France's policy. Additionally, the context and politics of the historian may be an influencing factor as historians on the Left, such as Paul Preston, have a negative and subjective view of France's policy.³⁸

Another challenge was the availability of primary French sources, as government minutes were difficult to obtain and those available were often redacted or summarized, for example the details of what was said in the meetings between France and Britain regarding non-intervention.³⁹ In addition, it was challenging to assess Britain's influence on France's decision as the important conversations were held 'off record', such as conversations between Eden and Blum, and French speeches deliberately omitted the impact of British pressure.⁴⁰ This meant that I had to 'interpret' and read between the lines for some sources. I attempted to compensate for this by drawing from different documents that disclosed the beliefs and promises of individuals, which revealed much detail on Blum's pacifism.

The French sources also brought some obstacles as I had to translate them myself. Even though I am bilingual, the complexity of the 'official' language was a challenge, and I may have missed some of the nuances in expression. In addition, my French context and background may have led to a degree of unintended bias and sympathy towards France's stance on the issue of non-intervention.

³⁷ Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (London, UK: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006)

³⁸ Paul Preston, *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War* (London, UK: Fontana Press, 1996), 102

³⁹ M. D. Gallagher, Leon Blum and the Spanish Civil War, vol. 6, *Journal of Contemporary History* (n.p.: Sage Publications, n.d.), 57.

⁴⁰ Gallagher, Leon Blum, 58.

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