

BOOK REVIEW

No Longer a Sphinx: Franklin D. Roosevelt and  
the Spanish Civil War

Dominic Tierney. *FDR and the Spanish Civil War: Neutrality and Commitment in the Struggle That Divided America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. 223 pp. Notes, maps, bibliography, index. \$74.95 (hardcover), \$21.95 (paper).

Of all the major international crises of the 1930s—Manchuria, Ethiopia, the Rhineland, the Anschluss, the Sudetenland—none aroused half the passion of the Spanish Civil War. In part, the reason lay in the fact that the conflict continued for three years. In part, it was the one crisis in which some Americans were directly engaged. In part, it centered on the fact that an embryonic democracy was nipped in the bud after a brief and tumultuous birth.

To many contemporaries, the Spanish conflict appeared to be part of an international civil war between right and left. Hence its outcome could well affect the fate of self-government everywhere. Even the book titles of scholarly works convey the intensity of feeling—*The Lost Cause*, *The Wound in the Heart*—not to mention such works of fiction as *No Parasas!*, *For Whom The Bells Tolls*, and *Meet Me at the Barricades*. As late as 1986, literary critic Alfred Kazin wrote an essay in the *New Republic* titled “The Wound That Will Not Heal.”<sup>1</sup>

In his excellent new study, Dominic Tierney effectively argues that the conflict made the Second World War more likely, as it fused Hitler’s alliance with Mussolini and isolated both London and Paris from Moscow. He also claims that American nonintervention could well have played a significant role in the republic’s defeat, for the policy hamstrung Loyalist performance throughout the war.

Fighting broke out on July 18, 1936, when the forces of Francisco Franco raised the flag of revolt from their base in Spanish Morocco. Within a week, Adolf Hitler began shipping planes and tanks to the rebel forces, an act soon followed by Benito Mussolini’s support. In mid-September the Soviets started sending military aid to the republic, orchestrating as well “international brigades” of pro-Loyalist volunteers. In an effort to contain the struggle, the European powers, led by Britain, agreed on August 15 to a noninterventionist

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1. Alfred Kazin, “The Wound That Will Not Heal,” *New Republic* (August 5, 1986): 39–41.

policy. Franklin D. Roosevelt immediately levied a moral embargo, though he soon found it unenforceable. In January 1937, the president recommended a nondiscriminatory arms embargo, a policy that received such strong congressional support that no one in the Senate and just one person in the House voted against the proposal. Disputing claims that the staunchly anti-Communist State Department fostered this embargo so as to undermine the republic, Tierney sees diplomatists Cordell Hull and Joseph Green, not to mention Ambassador Claude Bowers, as genuinely neutral.

Few of Roosevelt's policies have been so criticized—and have met with so many different explanations. George Q. Flynn sees Roosevelt seeking a wider revision of the neutrality laws, something not to be confused with the Spanish crisis. Piers Brendon finds FDR tacitly pro-Franco. Leo V. Kanawada, Jr., stresses Roman Catholic pressure as did Interior Secretary Harold L. Ickes. F. Jay Taylor includes FDR's belief that the American people in general backed the embargo. Wayne S. Cole notes State Department initiative, Richard Traina the desire to buttress the positions of Britain and France. Conversely Douglas Little perceives an anti-Communist ideology so intense that the United States was engaging in "malevolent neutrality."<sup>2</sup>

Often missing in such interpretations is Roosevelt himself, who—if anything—is often portrayed as a passive spectator. To Tierney, however, FDR must be moved front and center, for he served as the very linchpin of American policy. Tierney has examined manuscript collections at the FDR Presidential Library, State Department archives, and the British Public Records Office as well as the papers of such figures as Cordell Hull, Claude Bowers, Harold Ickes, and Anthony Eden.

To Tierney, Roosevelt was far from being apathetic, being an attentive leader and, contrary to myth, eventually a far-sighted one as well. It was during the Spanish war, the author argues, that Roosevelt broke with isolationist opinion and a "Fortress America" stance, instead seeking to aid Europe's democracies.

Admittedly at first the president exercised much caution. Although he was always sympathetic to the Spanish republic, he told Senator Tom Connally in 1936 that it was "far from 'democratic' as we understand the term." FDR did not, however, initially see the conflict as affecting American interests. Rather he saw great danger lying in the escalation of the struggle, in much the same manner as the Sarajevo crisis had triggered the Great War just over two decades

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2. George Q. Flynn, *Roosevelt and Romanism: Catholics and American Diplomacy, 1937-45* (Westport, CT, 1976) 46; Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (New York, 2000), 386; Leo V. Kanawada, Jr., *Franklin D. Roosevelt's Diplomacy and American Catholics, Italians, and Jews* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1982), chap. 3; Harold L. Ickes, entry of May 12, 1938, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes: vol. 2, The Inside Struggle, 1936-1939* (New York, 1954), 389-90; F. Jay Taylor, *The United States and the Spanish Civil War* (New York, 1956), 188; Wayne S. Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists, 1932-1945* (Lincoln, NE, 1983), 224; Richard P. Traina, *American Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War* (Bloomington, IN, 1968), chap. 2; *Malevolent Neutrality: The United States, Great Britain and the Origins of the Spanish Civil War* (Ithaca, NY, 1985), 265.

previously. An arms embargo, he believed, served as the best means of cooperating with British and French efforts to contain the crisis. Indeed, Tierney finds Roosevelt's famous Quarantine speech of October 5, 1937, referring to Spain as well as to East Asia. Yet, if the president strongly backed a policy of nonintervention, he would still support the Loyalists on minor matters, such as permitting the formation of American brigades and allowing passports for medical personnel.

By late 1937, however, Roosevelt's fear of a major conflagration gradually gave way to anxieties concerning widespread fascist aggression. Hence he toyed with the idea of extending the arms embargo to Germany and Italy, doing so to bolster the Spanish republic's resistance while reducing great power intervention. FDR only abandoned the idea upon hearing that it would interfere with Britain's own efforts to remove all foreign forces from the peninsula. At any rate, Tierney argues, such a move might have been merely symbolic, for neither Berlin nor Rome was making major arms purchases in the United States.

A year later Roosevelt's beliefs had become so radically transformed that he saw Franco's triumph injuring American interests. Both the Anschluss and Munich made Spain appear part of a wider pattern. If Franco won, he might ally himself with Germany and Italy in future European conflict, thereby forcing France to face a war on three fronts and threatening British Gibraltar. Moreover, a Franco triumph would serve as a model for German intervention in any civil war taking place in the Western Hemisphere. Those Germans living in Latin America could intervene in a civil conflict after which fascist aircraft would intervene, as had been the case in Spain. In addition, FDR became increasingly repelled by the generalissimo's brutality, in particular the bombing of civilians in Barcelona.

Drawing upon newly discovered documents in Russian and American archives, Tierney notes that in the spring of 1938 Roosevelt was secretly developing a scheme to circumvent Congress and the British by providing covert aid to the Loyalists. He planned to ship a large number of American planes to France, where they would be quietly shipped across the Spanish border. Indeed, the reason he opposed Senator Gerald P. Nye's proposal to repeal the embargo was in order to advance this alternative plan. The project foundered on FDR's own misgivings, reinforced by the opposition of diplomat William C. Bullitt, the closing of the French frontier, and the fear that such efforts would undermine any European mediation efforts.

In November 1938, Roosevelt also toyed with mediation himself. At a time when Republican forces were stabilizing their position, Roosevelt considered a plan involving the Vatican. The Roman Catholic Church would ask him to propose a three-man commission to govern Spain for several months after which, in due time, the indigenous Spaniards would take over. Although the Loyalists were strongly enthusiastic, Franco's increasingly victorious forces denounced any conciliation efforts. The Vatican, on its part, had already recognized the Nationalist government. In December the Pan-American conference held at Lima buried the proposal.

FDR similarly sought in December to send 250,000 barrels of government-held surplus flour to Spain. On the basis of need, much of this wheat would be shipped to the Loyalists, for at this time, the republic was on the verge of starvation, with its entire population on minimum rations. Roman Catholic opposition and an inept private relief committee aborted the project.

In all these efforts, he was bucking his own foreign policy advisors and Roman Catholic pressure. Indeed, according to Tierney, the war represents a crucial transformation in Roosevelt's thinking. No longer indifferent to events overseas, he would now seek to aid victims of aggression by concrete means short of war. Henceforth, he began to question the existing neutrality legislation, searching instead for innovative ways to challenge fascist powers without losing domestic support.

By 1939, however, it was too late, for the republic was clearly in its death throes. Speaking to his cabinet on January 27, Roosevelt called a Franco victory a defeat for American national interests. He called the embargo "a grave mistake," suggesting that Spain could well be the first round in a general civil war. A cash-and-carry policy, FDR maintained, would have enabled the Loyalists to receive needed weapons. In November the president privately sought ways to lift the embargo, but congressional ineptitude and Republican collapse in January 1939 made such efforts irrelevant.

Although demythologizing Roosevelt's supposed indifference, Tierney places much blame on FDR for the flawed Spanish policy. The president accepted a mandatory arms embargo, thereby denying himself needed flexibility—"a cardinal error for a creative policy maker" (p. 153). Had he fought in January 1937 for the same kind of discriminatory embargo Congress gave him four months later for other internal conflicts, he likely would have ultimately lifted the embargo on Spain. Moreover, only in an address delivered on January 4, 1939, did he attempt to educate the nation concerning dangers of existing neutrality policy. Even here he made no reference to Spain. Roosevelt, Tierney writes, "shied away from the kind of decisive, public, and politically hazardous intervention that might ultimately have been necessary to save the Spanish Republic" (p. 160).

It is difficult to fault such a fine volume. Particularly strong is Tierney's treatment of public opinion, business involvement, and the wider global setting. The maps are most helpful as is the author's brief coverage of the narrative down through 1955. This reviewer has found only one factual error: May 1, 1937, was the date Roosevelt signed a permanent neutrality act, not the date it passed both houses of Congress (p. 52). The prose is lucid, research thorough, conclusions balanced. Tierney has given us a model of superb diplomatic history.