Part I: Soviet-Spanish Relations: Diplomacy Before and During the Spanish Civil War

1. Soviet and Comintern Policy in Spain Prior to July 1936
2. Soviet Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War
3. The Spanish Republic's Diplomatic Mission to Moscow

Until the third decade of the twentieth century, Spain had never occupied a place of primary importance in the Russian imagination. Isolated in the opposite corner of the European landmass, Spain seemed a good deal farther from Russia than its presence on the same small continent would suggest. It was not until the late seventeenth century that Russia began to develop economic and diplomatic agreements with Western Europe, and these efforts did not often extend across the Pyrenees. Peter the Great's westernization campaign was mostly conducted in relation to Northern Europe. Having spent his youth among the foreign residents of Moscow's German suburb, he aspired to understand and eventually recreate the sophistication of the great German, Dutch, and English cities. This tradition continued for the balance of Romanov rule, through the German-born tsarina Catherine II's ascension to the throne, the dominance of French as the preferred language of the Russian nobility, and finally, the Anglophone reign of Nicholas II.

If the tsars' foreign interests were focused toward the major states of Northern Europe, the Iberian Peninsula was not wholly without significance for Russia. Contrary to the claim of one recent scholar, Spain and Russia did not "superbly ignore one another."

A full discussion of the cultural dimension of Russo-Spanish relations will be presented in Part Three below. For the moment, let us examine diplomatic relations between the two nations in the period before the Russian Revolution.

Russo-Spanish diplomacy prior to 1917, while perhaps easy to dismiss at first glance, is a rich and largely untapped source for the ambitious student of international relations. From the early eighteenth century onward, the crowns of Russia and Spain were only rarely without official representatives in each other's realms. The first official Russian diplomat sent to Spain was probably Petr Potemkin, who served from 1667 to 1668. A regular exchange of diplomats began in 1727, when Prince Shcherbatov established a consulate in Barcelona and Jacobo Fitz-James Stuart, Duke of Liria, set up residence in St. Petersburg. Over the course of the next two centuries, Imperial Russia was represented in Spain by nearly two-dozen high-ranking diplomats, while the Spanish crown sent a similar number to St. Petersburg. On the eve of the Revolution, both Russia and Spain had fully functioning embassies in their respective opposite corners of the continent. Ivan Maiskii, often well informed, fails badly when he claims that prior to the civil war, "the two countries had never come into any sort of contact, friendly or hostile."

Like most other states, in the wake of the October Revolution the Spanish government withdrew its ambassador from Russia. Initially, the Foreign Ministry allowed its chargé d'affaires to remain in Petrograd, but in November 1918 he too was recalled, and all Spanish interests in Russia were turned over to the Norwegian mission. For the next fifteen years, the political orientation of Spain and Russia veered in opposite directions: the Soviets consolidated their control over a union of communist states, while Spain remained under
Bourbon monarchy and, for the better part of the 1920s, a right-wing dictatorship. Spain would not recognize the legitimacy of the Bolshevik regime until midway through 1933, and ambassadors were exchanged only after the beginning of the civil war.

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Note 3: Letter from NKID (People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs) to VOKS (Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries), ? Dec. 1937, State Archive of the Russian Federation (hereafter, GARF), f. 5283, op. 3, del. 1015, ll. 5-6. Back.

Note 4: Ibid. See also Pelaz, "Los primeros españoles en San Petersburgo." Back.


Stalin and the Spanish Civil War