

The Mediterranean Problems in the Context of the International Aspects of the Civil War in Spain 1936-1939

Vera V. Malay, Svetlana Y. Krupskaya, Olga A. Timoshkova,
Andrew P. Uryvsky and Nicolay N. Fomichev
The National Research University "Belgorod State University" (BelSU),
Pobeda Street 85, 308015 Belgorod, Russia

Abstract: In their study, the researchers has made an attempt to analyze such international aspects of the Spanish Civil War as the Mediterranean aspect. The researchers looks at it in the context of international relations on the base of the materials from the Archives of Foreign policy of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, published diplomacy documents of main European countries. It is compared main tasks of leading European countries in Mediterranean context and then theirs tactics is studied. The Mediterranean aspect is studied, especially through Italian, British and Soviet policy. In conclusion, the researchers concentrate on serious consequences of contradictions the mediterranean, 1936-1939 for the fate of the Spain as well as for the international relations before World War II.

Key words: The Spanish Civil war, 1936-1939, international aspects, mediterranean aspect, international relations, all-European pre-war crisis

INTRODUCTION

The study presents a complex of the international problems generated by the Civil War in Spain 1936-1939. They began to be one of the important factors which have determined European situation on the eve of the second World War. The conflict in Spain at once has gone under sharply confrontational script. Having broken political balance on the European continent, it destabilized conditions in the mediterranean too.

Among geopolitical aspects of the Civil War in Spain mediterranean aspect is allocated. The understanding of the international aspects of the Civil War in Spain, 1936-1939 will not be complete without consideration of a role, a place and value in their complex of mediterranean aspect. The mediterranean crisis caused by the Italian aggression in Abyssinia has got new depth with the beginning of Civil War in Spain. It was, certainly, a part of all-European pre-war crisis. It got different forms and showed various precedents of the decision of the intermediate questions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the research various types of the analysis are implied: the principle scientific objectivity, historicism,

involving the consideration of the problem in all its diversity and requiring systemic treatment with historical sources and literature.

Such research methods as a method of historical descriptions, problem-chronological and specific analysis are also used in study. The tasks in research led to the frequent reference to the interdisciplinary sciences (Geopolitics, world politics, etc.). Historical and systematic method made it possible to consider a given problem in a complex of the international aspects of the war in Spain. Historical-comparative method allowed to identify common trends and specific policies of the European countries in the mediterranean sea in 1936-1939.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Main part: The mediterranean met the beginning of the Spanish tragedy in a condition of complex, both international and mutual relations, turning in the potential center of war. The British interests in the mediterranean sea were stacked in imperial, geopolitical interests, being crossed with Italian interests. But in the period under review "the British fleet could adequately confront only one enemy at the same place at the same time" (Bell, 1969).

Fascist Italy identified these interests with national. Mussolini even 3 years before coming to power has

declared: "The first thing to do is to expel foreigners, since the British from the mediterranean" (Morewood, 1989).

For France, Germany and the Soviet Union the mediterranean problems under these circumstances had the subordinated character.

In opinion of German diplomats and politicians, the period after occupation of the Rhine zone was marked not only by growth of German influence in Europe but also strengthening of the Italian military power, opportunity which have almost deprived France of performance of its allied obligations in the East of Europe by means of land forces. In such sense the Mediterranean Sea was represented by the super important arena for the potential military expansion and a line of distribution of troops and ammunition from small entente or Russia.

The Spanish conflict by virtue of geopolitical factors seriously touched a policy of the countries considering Mediterranean Sea as a sphere of the economic, military-political or colonial interests.

Fascist leaders as it is known, connected strengthening of the national safety directly with expansion goals. For Mussolini this task was projected in the greater degree to mediterranean sea and the central Europe, though till November 28, 1936 the Italian government formally did not proclaim the political and economic help to the Spanish nationalists (Coverdale, 1975). For Hitler Civil War in Spain was a convenient opportunity for realization of the spatial expansion's concept, distracting Italy from the central European problems and focusing on Iberian Peninsula and on the Western Mediterranean.

Fascist Italy, putting in a claim for mediterranean's "mistress" could not feel itself like comfortably if the entrance and exit in this "house" belonged to another. "We can ascertain with pride that today above mediterranean sea there is no point, capable to escape our control", this conclusion was made by Italian deputy minister of aircraft general Valle in April 1936.

France and Great Britain have found the best variant a "neutral" position non-intervention in Spain. This idea at the initial stage of war was maintained also by the Soviet leaders.

Italy and Germany determined their positions and the attitude to events developed in Spain already at the end of July, having interfered in them by support of rebels. Signing by them in August 1936 the agreement on non-intervention did not bring essential corrective amendments to these installations.

There was an intensive work in August 1936 in the British government on development of tactics both in actually Spanish and in mediterranean questions

(Buchanan, 2003). In other cases, the mediterranean aspect subordinated itself to actually Spanish. The first British vision of the Spanish situation was done as a whole through a prism of imperial interests: it was emphasized by heads and public figures of various political directions (Maiskii *et al.*, 1937). The British politics realized that Italy perceived war in Spain not only as struggle of communist and fascist ideologies but also mainly as an opportunity "to strengthen the influence and to weaken the British sea's power in the Western mediterranean".

Minister for Foreign Affairs A. Eden believed that the Italian strengthening in the Western Mediterranean "would give deep roots" and the Italo-British antagonism in that case could get sharper forms, than even in 1935. Having analyzed as the victory of this or that contradictory sides over Spain would affect Italy, Eden considered that "we should keep Spain from Italy".

To maintain prestige of "Great sea power" it was necessary to keep greatest possible the positions in mediterranean sea. As a whole, Britain has found more expedient during the considered period to solve problems in the Mediterranean Sea by a method of reconciliation, instead of resistance.

In day of the beginning of rebellion in the Spanish Morocco, German ambassador in Rome Hassel, yet not having the information about it, emphasized that the Italian relations with the western countries were defined entirely by problems of the Mediterranean Sea and dardanelles.

The beginning of the Italo German help to Franco and the designated prospect of consolidation of political and strategic positions of the fascist states on Iberian Peninsula created a certain danger to Great Britain and France. Capture of Balearic Islands by Italy had cut means of communication of France from Morocco for Great Britain the problem of the mediterranean passages seriously became aggravated.

The Soviet diplomacy constantly exaggerated and emphasized an idea of danger to Britain fascist victories over Spain. As the analysis of archival documents shows, the Soviet ambassador I.M. Maiskii came back to this idea hardly probable not during every meeting with English politicians, diplomats and public figures (Beseda *et al.*, 1936).

Mussolini received not only a victory over Ethiopia, but also a field for political maneuver in Europe: it was possible to try to agree with France and Britain, speculating on the Spanish and mediterranean problems. Thus, not losing hope to play "the German card". As the Soviet Ambassador in Rome Stein wrote, "Italy tried to sell as expensive as possible the possible anti-German position".

The Soviet diplomacy at the end of May 1936 had information that Italy had given England far-reaching guarantees in questions not only Abyssinia, safety of Egypt but also distribution of English and the Italian influence in the mediterranean sea. Between the countries there was no agreement on the specified problems but there was "a gentlemen's agreement" on the basic lines. "The gentlemen's agreement" for the considered moment meant that England silently took into account those guarantees which Italian ambassador in London Grandi formulated on behalf of the Italian government. It was planned to transform this arrangement to the agreement, "when passions would calm". The Spanish drama removed the conclusion of "the gentlemen's agreement" till January 1937 and gave a new painting to it.

During Reich minister's Hans Frank visit to Italy (the end of September 1936) it was emphasized, in particular that Germany would not interfere with the Italian aspirations to domination in mediterranean. The hope was expressed that Italy in turn, did not begin to resist German policy in Austria. After discussion of British policy Ciano wrote down in his diary: "our relations with London are bad very much also cannot improve "the owner of the mediterranean sea is and always there will be Italy" (Ciano, 1948).

As it is known Ciano on being on a visit to Berlin in 20th of October, has signed the so called report of Berlin Rome "Axis". The Soviet diplomacy regarded this report, as "an easy kick to the address of England" and results of Ciano's visit as "wreck of hopes for an opportunity of direct arrangement (Italy) with England on questions of the Mediterranean pool".

The policy of non-intervention in Spain testified to impossibility of the conclusion of the collective agreement across the mediterranean, besides after conference in Montreux the British politicians did not locate to collective actions. They defined the conclusion to attempt of normalization of the Anglo-Italian relations.

In well-known Mussolini's speech in Milan (on November 1, 1936) reconciliatory accentuated and the offer of England to enter into the gentlemen's agreement on the basic problems of the mediterranean was distributed. Similar invitations to negotiations were repeated by Italians at different political and diplomatic levels.

On January 2, 1937 the Anglo-Italian declaration was signed. According to this rather streamline document, the mediterranean was admitted a zone of vital interests of British Empire and Italy, both sides undertook to support the status quo in it as well as both mutual rights and interests in this region. Spain had not been mentioned in the declaration. In strictly legal sense, the agreement had

no any attitude to it but "politically as I.M. Maiskii wrote to Vice-Minister N.N. Krestinskii, just the Spanish affairs are litmus piece of paper for definition of value of the Anglo-Italian contract".

"The London politics as always, believed wrongly that, slightly patted Mussolini shoulder, it is possible to convince him not too zealously to interfere with internal affairs of Iberian peninsula, threatening thus preservation of the European world and safety of the British communications with the East" were marked by Maiskii and Litvinov (1937).

The Soviet side fairly believed, that it was more difficultly for Italy to find common language with France, than with England and process of improvement of relations between these countries would develop slow rates and substantially to depend on situation in Spain. Aspiring to avoid the international arrangements without its participation, the Soviet diplomacy, applied a maximum of efforts on their non-admission.

"The gentlemen's agreement" on an outcome of the second month of "action" has opened rather curious situation: according to Russian ambassador in Rome B. Shtein's sarcastic expression in it, "there were no neither agreements, nor gentlemen".

Thus, the Anglo-Italian agreement which was generated by the Spanish conflict has failed even in part to decide its problems and only established for some time very unsteady modus vivendi in the Western Mediterranean.

The spring of 1937 was marked by the further complication of a situation in Mediterranean Sea and around of Spain.

In the middle of April 1937 Eden shared the opinion with his military colleagues that Italy represented more danger to the world, than Germany and that "now war could arise more likely in the mediterranean, than somewhere else in Europe" (Pratt, 1975).

Soviet Diplomacy (Maiskii) considered (April 1937), that the tensions in the Anglo-Italian relations could decrease under influence of those or other circumstances, emphasizing that "the key to a course of events in Spain in many respects was in Mussolini's hands".

Non-intervention policy's crisis (June 1937) which began as the mediterranean crisis for a while has complicated attempts of the Anglo-Italian rapprochement.

Then in the European diplomatic circles hearings have amplified that official London puts forward an idea of triple Italian-Anglo-French the mediterranean pact with acknowledgement of preservation of territorial integrity of Spain. "By itself, the English contribution will be expressed also in recognition of annexation of Abyssinia" Litvinov considered.

In opinion of the Soviet diplomacy, the Spanish aspect was included in a question on domination on mediterranean sea "as a part just the general problem named more".

In German and Soviet tactics in this question some similarity was traced: the German diplomacy tried (and finally it was possible) to convince Italy of own disinterest in the given region, "having managed to get" at Italy the Central Europe in exchange for the Western mediterranean and Spain. The Soviet diplomacy, whenever possible did its best to bring in disagreements between the present and future international opponents, exaggerated in their eyes a geostrategic role and the importance of the mediterranean (Payne, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Thus, the mediterranean aspect of the Spanish problem began as one of litmus pieces of paper who precisely found out original character of bilateral as well as the international relations. At separate stages the situation around of Spain complicated the mediterranean crisis in others developed in parallel or even got the subordinated character.

It is possible to allocate the following phases of the mediterranean crisis in a context of the international aspects of the Civil war in Spain:

- July 1936 up to May 1937. It was the beginning of the Civil war in Spain, definition of the attitude to it of leading European powers, a prevalence of the Spanish problems in the mediterranean crisis, its slow character ("a so-called prestorm condition")
- Summer 1937 crisis of a policy of "non-intervention"; mediterranean sea started to play more and more actively a role of a change card (especially on a line England Italy)
- The end of August up to September 1937. It was a time of an aggravation of the mediterranean problems in connection with a piracy of so called "unknown submarines"; the Italy-Soviet diplomatic scandal; Nyon conference
- The end of 1937 up to March 1938. In this period an Anglo-Italian "vector" in the mediterranean crisis prevailed, military presence of these countries in region strengthen, alongside ways of peace settlement of controversial problems were being searched. The Anglo-Italian agreement was signed
- Spring 1938 up to September 1939. The amplitude of the mediterranean crisis was reduced; it was gradually subordinated to all-European crisis. It was also a time of complications or improvements in this

context of mutual relations. The Spanish war came to its end. The policy of appeasement in Spain as well as in the mediterranean failed

To summarize, the Spanish war became catalyst of the further deepening of the international contradictions in this region, having strengthened tendencies of "the Mediterranean appeasement" as well as forming block policy. As shows the analysis, actually mediterranean problem for the Great Britain and Italy during some moments prevailed above actually Spanish, dooming last on longer and heavy agony.

REFERENCES

- Bell, D., 1969. British Policy in the mediterranean, 1919-1939. In: *La Mediterranee de 1919-1939. Actes du Colloque organise par le Centre de la Mediterranee moderne et contemporaine*. Paris, pp: 75.
- Buchanan, T., 2003. Edge of Darkness: British 'Front-line' Diplomacy in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1937. In: *Contemporary European History*, Aug. (12): 279-303;
- Fry, J.K., 2001. The Politics of Crisis. An Interpretation of British Politics, 1931-1945. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Ciano, G., 1948. Diplomatic Papers. 1936-1942. L., pp: 46.
- Coverdale, J., 1975. Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, pp: 31-84, 388-389.
- Beseda s Daltonom, Oktyabrya and Beseda s Edenom, Dekabrya, 1936. Dnevnik sovet'skogo posla, I.M., Velikobritanij Maiskogo, AVP RF. Fund 069, record series 20, file 4, pp: 35-36, 51 (In Russian).
- Morewood, S., 1989. Anglo-Italian Rivalry in the mediterranean and middle East, 1935-1940. In: *Paths to War: New Essays on the Origins of the Second World's War*. Ed. by R. Boyce and E.M. Robertson. L. Macmillan, pp: 169.
- Maiskii, I., Lothian, Lloyd-George, A. Garvin, 1937. For example in conversations with I. Maiskii (Soviet Ambassador in London) Lothian (liberal) (on December, 10, 1936), Minister of Defense Inskip (on November, 22 1937), Lloyd-George (on July, 1 1937). The Observer's editor A. Garvin (November 1937), etc. AVP RF. Fund 069, record series 20, file 4, page 69; record series 21, file 24, pp: 80, 158, 164 (In Russian).
- Maiskii, I. and M.M. Litvinovy, 1937. Ibid, pp: 52-52, 76. 24 Iunia. 1937 (In Russian).
- Pratt, L., 1975. East of Malta, West of Suez: Britain's Mediterranean Crises, 1936-1939. Cambridge, pp: 65.
- Payne, S.G., 2004. The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union and Communism. New Haven, L. Yale Univ. Press.