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## A quietening effect ? The BBC and the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)

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## **'A Quietening Effect'? - The BBC and the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)**

### **Abstract**

This article examines how the British government sought to recruit the BBC in its propaganda activities concerning the Spanish Civil War and in particular to 'quieten' domestic public opinion about the conflict. It also considers the extent to which the Corporation acceded to government demands and concludes that, despite areas of co-operation and even complicity, there were also putative signs of editorial innovation and independence in the BBC's news service. In the disquiet this created in official circles, the Spanish Civil War presaged many future conflicts between public broadcasters and governments about the coverage of international crises

(7976 words)

### **Introduction**

The Spanish Civil War was a domestic conflict in name only. From the outset, it attracted the attention of foreign governments, political parties, activists, workers, journalists, intellectuals and artists, and these external interventions were crucial to the war's wider symbolic construction. The significance of this dimension cannot be overstated, as this broader ideological battle about who was at fault and what was at stake in Spain laid the foundations for the various forms of international action and inaction that eventually secured victory for the Nationalist rebellion in April 1939.

This article analyses one microcosm of this international debate, examining how the British government formulated its policy in Spain and sought to recruit the assistance of its

national broadcasting system in legitimising its strategic vision. By labelling this a 'microcosm' I do not mean to undersell the significance of this particular battle, for Britain's reputation as a major global imperial power remained largely intact in the 1930s, and it was not only General Franco who recognised that Britain's response would have a critical impact on the outcome of the war. Similarly, by talking of the 'recruitment' of national broadcasters, I do not want to suggest that the BBC passively deferred to government strictures. As I shall show, the Spanish Civil War heightened tensions between officials and broadcasters and became a testing ground for many of the precepts and principles of a public broadcasting service that was then still in its infancy. I begin this analysis by discussing how the British government organised its propaganda strategy on Spain and where the BBC featured within these plans.

### **The formation and communication of British foreign policy on Spain (1936-1939)**

When the Nationalist rebellion against the Republican government of Spain broke out in July 1936 - an event that took the British Foreign Office as much by surprise as it did the international media (Peters 228) - the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, instructed Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, that 'on no account' must Britain be brought 'into the fight on the side of the Russians' (Edwards 18). Eden later resigned in February 1938 in protest at Chamberlain's decision to enter into negotiations with Mussolini, despite Italy's flagrant interventions in Abyssinia and Spain, and became a key Conservative Party opponent to appeasement (Rose). Nevertheless, he shared Baldwin's views at the outset that British interests were best served by containing the conflict and played a central role in the brokering of an international agreement on non-intervention that came into effect several weeks after the fighting started. This agreement was conceived in haste, the rush necessitated by evidence that Germany and Italy had started arm shipments to the rebels and, in response, France was contemplating opening its borders to permit the free flow of weapons to the Republic. The

British government adamantly opposed French actions and threatened to withdraw from mutual security agreements. The subsequent Non Intervention Agreement was conceived by the Blum government as an alternative strategy for diffusing international tensions and inhibiting the extension of fascist and communist influence in the region, but it was Britain that nurtured it and promoted it most assiduously, not least through its hosting of the meetings of the international Non Intervention Committee whose principal role was to prevent arms and volunteers from reaching the warring parties. And even when evidence grew of the ineffectiveness of the policy, the response of the British government was seek to bolster rather than abandon non intervention through the introduction of effective frontier and sea patrols and prohibiting the dispatch of foreign volunteers.

A core part of the government's strategy for achieving military isolation of the war was to contain discussion of its wider political significance and symbolism. Throughout, senior officials sought to cool the ardour of public debate and deny the wider international and ideological ramifications of the conflict. They believed effective management of the mainstream media was crucial for achieving these objectives, in part because of the prevalent, and largely untested, assumptions at the time about media influence. As Tom Buchanan notes:

In the 1930s 'public opinion' was conventionally regarded as being the public view of opinion-formers, who interpreted the sentiments of their voiceless fellow-citizens. Considerable power was seen to reside in the editorial columns of leading newspapers, especially *The Times* -hence the attempts by government to manage their views on sensitive issues like appeasement. Public opinion was not an entity to be scientifically tested, but rather an amorphous public morality, to be interpreted and moulded by politicians and journalists (22)

Buchanan makes no reference to the BBC, but there is no doubt that the Corporation was a significant factor in this equation. For example, in March 1937,

Eden complained to the Cabinet that ‘the difficulties of the present situation were being very much increased with the attitude of the Press and Parliament’ and reminded Cabinet members:

that the British Broadcasting Corporation published daily bulletins in regard to Spain, as well as weekly talks, and that these had a widespread effect resulting in pressure being put by constituents on Members of Parliament. If the British Broadcasting Corporation could be induced to drop their nightly statements it was suggested that it would have a quietening effect<sup>i</sup>

In his complaints to the Cabinet, Eden was concerned about ‘quietening’ domestic opinion in Britain, a point reiterated in official communications during this period. However, the government was also mindful of how British news content was received abroad and wanted to avoid situations where negative or provocative material might exacerbate international tensions. In this respect, official concerns were particularly focused on the BBC and *The Times*. The reason *The Times* featured so prominently was only partly due to its international status. It was widely recognised that the paper’s editor, Geoffrey Dawson enjoyed privileged access to the senior echelons of government and identified ‘not so much with the Conservative interest as the ministerial mind’ (Koss 1008). For this reason, it was assumed in foreign embassies across the world that close scrutiny of the paper’s leader columns would give a clear indication of the direction of British government thinking. This was an important consideration for the BBC as well, as the principles of public broadcasting, in which a state funded media corporation retained significant autonomy from government control, was still a novel and imperfectly understood concept in the 1930s, especially in the Fascist states where the BBC was seen as the official mouthpiece of the British government (Haworth). But, as shall be shown, this wasn’t the sole reason why the BBC figured so prominently in government calculations.

The government’s news management strategy on Spain between 1936 and 1938 was

mainly organised and implemented via the News Department of the Foreign Office, headed by Sir Reginald 'Rex' Leeper. The department was the sole survivor of the major dismantling of the government's propaganda apparatus that occurred in 1918 and, having survived on frugal resources for many years, was at the vanguard of attempts in some official circles to stimulate a resurgence of state investment in communication as international tensions grew (Deacon 81-85). The propaganda model conceived by Leeper and his colleagues at the Foreign Office aimed to address international and domestic opinion in a distinctive way. In promoting the values and virtues of an 'open' political system internationally, they sought to avoid the brashness, aggression and instrumentalism that typified the propaganda of 'closed' totalitarian systems. Emphasis was placed instead on 'cultural propaganda' designed to foster awareness and appreciation of British institutions and values, rather than to deprecate competitors or enemies. These values also infused the news management strategies developed by the Foreign Office, which encouraged factual and measured debate of international matters rather than impassioned and partisan commentary (Willcox: 107).

In terms of domestic opinion, the Foreign Office's plans were more didactic. Just before the rebellion in Spain, Leeper outlined plans for a campaign 'for the education of the public' on foreign affairs using the press, the BBC, the League of Nations Union 'and perhaps the churches'. He wrote:

We have to rearm our people not only materially, but morally. . . We must concentrate not only on our rearmament, but on bringing other nations to our side and by instilling in them such confidence in our leadership and determination that they too will rearm and abandon an attitude of defeatism vis-à-vis Germany. But if we are to inspire them with this confidence, education must begin at home. We must be swift, bold and persistent. It is insufficient to make a few public speeches for the News Department of the Foreign



Office to make points with the press. I suggest the whole programme must be conceived on wider and bolder lines if it is to bear fruit and to bear fruit quickly<sup>ii</sup>

The BBC was expected to play a vital and distinctive role in this ambitious project.

Leeper set out his vision in a report in April 1937 on his consultations with senior BBC managers:

What seemed to me to be required, I told them, was that the BBC should deal with the subjects that really mattered to this country and should thereby try to get the public thinking on sensible lines. I suggested therefore a meeting with Sir R[obert] Vansittart, Sir A[lexander] Cadogan [Foreign Office], possibly myself present for the F.O. and Sir J[ohn] Reith, Mr [Cecil] Graves [Director of Programmes] and Sir R[obert] Machonachie [Director of Talks] for the BBC at which a general discussion might take place on the major objectives of British foreign policy which would take explain to the BBC on what subjects they should try to fasten public attention during the next 6 months. *The press unfortunately worked on a day to day programme, whereas the BBC should have a long term programme in mind.* What I have in mind is that the Sec. of State should take the BBC into his confidences in much the same way as he has taken the Dominion Prime Ministers – perhaps even more so<sup>iii</sup>

Despite these ambitions, the Spanish Civil War proved to be the high water mark of the News Department's influence and its dominance dwindled following Neville Chamberlain's election as Prime Minister in 1938. This was due to intra-governmental divisions over Chamberlain's policy of appeasement towards Germany and Italy. Rex Leeper and Sir Robert Vansittart (Leeper's senior at the Foreign Office and Permanent Under Secretary until 1938, then Chief Diplomatic Adviser) used counter briefings from the News Department as a means of sabotaging 'the government's zeal for appeasement' (Cockett, 1990: 79), which incensed the

Prime Minister so greatly he sacked both, silenced the News Department over the Munich agreement and asserted a direct command of the communication of foreign policy via the Cabinet Office. However, such divisions were not apparent in government policy or communication over Spain. For most of the conflict, the government spoke with one voice and the News Department willingly promoted this official line. There were several reasons for this compliance. In 1936, appeasement was an emerging rather than established policy and the full extent of Germany and Italy's military ambitions had not become clear. There had also been a general breakdown in the cordiality of relations between the Spanish and British governments prior to the war and British ministers and diplomats identified more closely with the social and military elites implicated in the rebellion. But the principal reason lay in the Foreign Office's fear of Communism. According to Edwards:

While Fascism and Communism were regarded in the Foreign Office as the 'mumps and measles' of world society, the former was believed to be an urgent but short-term problem; the latter a longer-term one, which in consequence was never quite out of view, and especially in regard towards France and Spain (3)

Foreign Office news management over Spain operated through two means - routine, off-the-record briefings of senior diplomatic correspondents and high level consultations with senior editors, managers and proprietors. In the former, Leeper often spoke with candour about Foreign Office concerns, which marked a departure from the suspicious stance traditionally adopted by the Foreign Office towards journalists. As Cockett notes, '[Leeper] realised that with a certain degree of flattery, openness and coercion, the diplomatic correspondents could be welded into a cohesive body who would always put the Foreign Office view in the press' (74).

Most journalists in Leeper's cadre represented 'up market' newspapers, revealing the Foreign Office's principal concern with elite opinion formation, both domestically and internationally (Adamthwaite: 282). As noted, the BBC was considered to be at least as important in opinion formation as these organisations, but despite this, Leeper's lobby was not a direct element in official management of BBC content for two reasons. First, these arrangements were intended to shape the news agenda, rather than respond to it, through the strategic release of factual information and unattributed comment. But the BBC was not a significant news-gathering organisation during this period. During the 1920s and early 1930s, the news services provided by the BBC were limited, a lowly and marginalized aspect of the Corporation's 'Talks Department'. It was only in 1934 that the news and talks department became formally separated, and although staffing of the news department increased significantly between 1935 and 1939, 'the department was only beginning to discover the methods and routines of news gathering and presentation when war was declared' (Scannell and Cardiff 105). This meant that the BBC news service was almost entirely dependent on news agency material for its content during the civil war. (The sole exception came in January 1939 when Richard Dimbleby travelled to the French-Spanish border to report upon the plight of Republicans refugees fleeing Nationalist advances [Dimbleby 84 -89].) This news-processing function was, of course, important and required the Foreign Office News Department to remain in 'almost daily' contact with the BBC on the material used. Nevertheless, Leeper acknowledged this was largely an *ex post facto* process, different from the agenda-building function of the diplomatic lobby:

News comes into the BBC from agencies up to the last minute and we have to rely on the judgement of the BBC staff as to what is broadcast by them. When they are in doubt they telephone to us and we advise them, but very often they may have no doubts where

they ought to have them. The Foreign Office cannot under existing arrangements do more to check the news bulletins than is being done at present<sup>iv</sup>

Second, the BBC remained accountable formally to government, for all its emerging independence of spirit, and there were strong institutional mechanisms in place by which ministers and officials could exert influence on editorial content directly, at the highest levels.

Some historical analyses of BBC-government relations during this period appear to suggest that Foreign Office control was easily achieved. For example, Haworth writes of the ‘old guard rectitude’, ‘staid respectability’ and ‘unimaginative trustworthiness’ that permeated the senior echelons of the BBC at the time (Howarth: 51-2). However, reading the accounts given by senior officials at the time, one is struck as much by their exasperation at getting the BBC to accede to their wishes, as their confident expectation of success. Part of this was due to long-standing and increasing tensions between the government and broadcasters that were starting to boil over by the time the civil war broke out. Although ministers and officials frequently paid lip-service to the principles of BBC independence, in practice they were vexed by what they perceived as unnecessarily contentious coverage. Their most acute concerns in this respect were the BBC ‘News Talks’: programmes in which selected public figures were invited to contribute comments on topical issues.

As has been widely discussed elsewhere, the government made several complaints about the content of particular talks before the civil war began. For example, in 1933 the Foreign Office was incensed when the respected journalist Vernon Bartlett suggested that Germany was justified in feeling aggrieved at its post-war settlement. Leeper claimed this commentary contravened the BBC Charter, and, although Bartlett received public support for his comments, he was removed from the BBC roster for several years as a consequence (Briggs 146). On other occasions, the

government moved to prevent programmes from being broadcast. In 1935, the BBC proposed a series of talks by British politicians that would include Oswald Mosley, the leader of the British Union of Fascists, and Harry Pollit, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Officials quickly communicated their displeasure, particularly at the prospect of Pollit's presence, and both news talks were eventually abandoned after a directive from the Board of Governors (Haworth 49).

The early stages of the Spanish Civil War coincided, therefore, with a period when tensions between the BBC and the government were intensifying. The conflict became so bad that by early 1937 senior BBC managers and the Foreign Office News Department started negotiations to create a situation where the BBC could participate fully 'in the ventilation of questions affecting foreign affairs' whilst remaining mindful 'that His Majesty's Government are not thereby embarrassed in the conduct of their affairs'<sup>v</sup>. Inevitably, the Corporation's coverage of Spain was a prominent consideration in these negotiations. In May 1937, Leeper had a meeting with Cecil Graves, the BBC's Director of Programmes, and Robert Machonachie, Director of Talks, in which, according to his account, "They tried to tie me down to what could or could not be said about Spain or what they wanted me to say about other countries"<sup>vi</sup>

The specific trigger for this meeting was Foreign Office objections to two news-talks broadcast in early 1937, neither of which focused on Spain specifically. One of the talks outlined the Nazi's perspective on international relations, and the second discussed the achievements of Communism in the Soviet Union. Leeper and Vansittart condemned both talks, respectively, as 'pernicious stuff' and 'quite intolerable'<sup>vii</sup> and Vansittart requested an urgent meeting with Sir John Reith, the Director General of the BBC, to discuss their wider implications.

A comparison of Vansittart's and Reith's separate accounts of this meeting, held on 9 March 1937, provides valuable insight into the government's specific editorial interventions over

BBC coverage of Spain. The initial part of the meeting concerned the two news talks, and both accounts concur closely as to the substance of this discussion. According to Reith's account:

What he would like is for us to keep off Communism and Nazi-ism and Fascism for the next year or two, and if, for any reason, we were unable or unwilling to do so, he asked that there might be good liaison with his people in order that the ground might be properly prepared and such talks as were given not be open to misunderstanding and, above all, not be liable to cause trouble to the Foreign Office in the delicate state of affairs existing and likely to continue to exist<sup>viii</sup>.

Vansittart's record of the meeting concludes on this point, with an expression of his satisfaction that Reith 'was in complete agreement about the need for close collaboration between us... He was most friendly and helpful and suggested that the purpose I had in view might be achieved by even closer contact between Mr Leeper on the one hand and Mr Graves and Sir Richard Machonachie on the other'<sup>ix</sup>

Reith's account, however, details an additional discussion concerning the BBC's news coverage of the Spanish Civil War and that is omitted from Vansittart's report. It is worth relating Reith's record of this part of the conversation in full:

With regard to Spanish news, [Vansittart] says there is now little doubt that Franco will be in Madrid and in due course in control of Spain. He says Franco feels that the B.B.C. and *The Times* are against him and therefore the Government must be against him too. He says this is deplorable, since it will send Franco more into the arms of Italy and Germany than ever. The Foreign Office are very anxious to prevent the establishment of

a new Fascist state in Spain, which would, of course, put France in a nice position, and the British Government is the only power that can prevent this from happening. He quite honestly feels that our Spanish news will make a considerable difference to the future in this respect.

He would be very grateful if we could at least put out no more [Republican] government news, irrespective of the amount that comes in, than Insurgent news. It is quite obvious, in fact, that he would be glad if we became sufficiently obviously pro-Insurgent to convince Franco that we and therefore the Government are not anti-Franco. He would, in addition be very pleased if we could see our way to dropping the term 'insurgent', which apparently is resented on that side, adopting perhaps 'Nationalists'.

You will want to have a talk with me about this when you consider the matter. I think we can without inconvenience do what he wants with regards to Spanish news, but I don't think we can adopt the new term. We might, however, drop the old one.

This is definitive evidence of the degree to which the British government engaged in special-pleading on Franco's behalf, even to the extent of proposing that the BBC should bias coverage intentionally in the Nationalist's favour. It also shows the readiness with which British officials were prepared to write off the Republic's chances, even though the war still had two years to run at this stage. Furthermore, it demonstrates how willingly the government invoked issues of national security as justification, an argument that proved very potent a year later in securing the supplication of the British news media in their reporting of the Munich Agreement and appeasement more generally. The question about terminology might seem a minor point, but

was actually the source of considerable controversy at the time. The Nationalists in particular were extremely sensitive to being described as ‘rebels’ or ‘insurgents’, perceiving both as a slight on their legitimacy and authority (see Deacon). Reith’s response is also interesting, suggesting receptiveness to Vansittart’s requests, even though he expressed reservations about the adoption of the term ‘Nationalist’, presumably due to concerns about audience comprehension. The question is: what effect did Vansittart’s directives, and Reith’s apparent compliance, have on BBC editorial coverage of Spain subsequently?

### **BBC Coverage of Spain**

In covering the Spanish Civil War, the BBC also encountered considerable, and often contradictory, pressure from sources outside official circles. Such was the strength, extent and polarity of feeling engendered by the war, the BBC decided to restrict all coverage to the News Department (the Talks Department produced nothing upon the war), but even here it ‘found itself in trouble enough’ (Scannell and Cardiff 78). For example, in January 1937 the BBC’s coverage of Spain was attacked in a series of *Daily Mail* articles as proof of ‘red bias’ on the radio. This accusation was based on readers’ written complaints, allegations from one of the paper’s Spanish correspondents, Cecil Gerahty, that the BBC had refused material from him because it was deemed too pro-Franquist, and the fact that one of the authors of the BBC news talks was the diplomatic correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, an influential pro-Republican title<sup>x</sup>. However, three months later the BBC was pilloried as an ‘Ally of Reaction’ by the Communist controlled *Daily Worker* for its practice of selecting news agency material from Republican Spain more rigorously than the Nationalist side, as part of its attempt to ensure balance in its coverage (quoted in Scannell and Cardiff 81). The BBC adopted this compensatory strategy because far more agency material flowed from the Republican sector than the Nationalist<sup>xi</sup>, partly because of the Republic’s technical advantages<sup>xii</sup>, but mainly because of its more sophisticated



communication activities and less repressive treatment of foreign journalists and news agencies (Deacon 13-44).

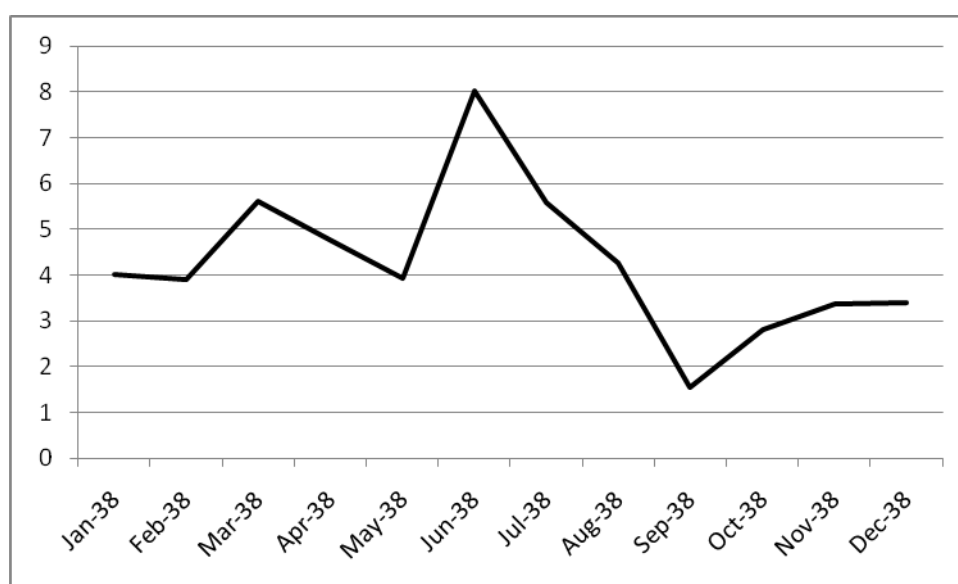
Similar claims and counter claims also surfaced in Parliament. For example, in February 1937 a long term critic of the BBC, Captain Archibald Ramsay, Conservative MP for Peebles, asked the Assistant Postmaster General to investigate the ‘grave dissatisfaction’ about the alleged downplaying of information received from Franco’s side<sup>xiii</sup>. After receiving assurances from the Minister that he would convey members’ concerns to the BBC, a Labour MP retorted, to opposition cheers: ‘Is the Minister aware that many of us are of the opinion that the B.B.C. shows too much partiality to Franco?’ (ibid.). By 1938, the pressures on the News Department were so intense that R.T. Clarke, the department’s senior news editor, confronted the new Director General, Cecil Graves, to demand that the attacks on “his boys” should stop. It is claimed that Clarke was nearly sacked for his insubordination, only being saved by a supportive petition from news room staff (Dimbleby 84).

The only way of appraising the validity of these accusations of partiality against the BBC, as well as looking for evidence as to whether external pressures, official or otherwise, inhibited the News Department’s editorial response, is to look in detail at the BBC’s actual coverage of the war at the time. This investigation begins with an analysis of BBC Home news reports on the Spanish Civil War broadcast for the entirety of 1938. The time frame for this sample is dictated by the limited availability of written records on BBC Bulletins<sup>xiv</sup> but in many ways the timing is propitious for the purposes of this analysis, as it falls well after the Vansittart- Reith meeting. If the Foreign Office pressure had strategically affected BBC news reporting, these changes would be evident in coverage produced during this sample period.

## **Home News**

In 1938, Home News bulletins ran 1558 news items on Spain, which represents an average of 4.26 news items per day. The frequency of coverage varied month by month, with the most intense period falling in June and the least in September (see figure 1). It is only possible to speculate the reasons for the latter, but it may be pertinent to note that this was the month of the Munich crisis, which ended with the British Prime Minister conducting crisis talks with Adolph Hitler in a bid to avert a pan-European conflict over Czechoslovakia.

**Figure 1: Daily Average Number of BBC Home News Items Concerning the Spanish Civil War (1 January – 31 December 1938)**



**Table 1: Principal themes in BBC radio news items: 1 January – 31 December 1938**

		%
Battle stories (59%)	Nationalist air attacks on British ships	12
	Nationalist air attacks on other international ships	2
	Other Nationalist air attacks	17
	Nationalist land/ naval attacks and advances	16
	Republican air attacks	1
	Republican land/ naval attacks and advances	7
	Both sides' air attacks	1

	Both sides' land/ naval attacks	5
Intervention/ non-intervention (18%)	Pro Nationalist intervention	5
	Pro Republican intervention	3
	Withdrawal of volunteers scheme	5
	Non Intervention Committee discussions/decisions	5
	Comments about successes/ failings of NI	0.5
Other political interests/ actions/responses (16%)	Nationalist sector	2
	Republican sector	4
	Both sectors	0.3
	UK	7
	Other national	3
Other international diplomacy (3%)	Bombing of open towns	2
	Other international diplomacy	1
Other (0.1%)	All other themes	0.1
	(Number of news items)	(1558)

Notes: one principal theme was identified for each news item. Percentages=number of themes in each category/ total number of news items coded. All percentages above 0.5% are rounded. Totals may not add up to 100.

Table 1 identifies the most dominant themes in BBC news items for this period. More than half of news items focused upon military issues in Spain, with Nationalist actions, advances and advantages receiving by far the highest levels of coverage. In military terms, most attention was given to nationalist aerial attacks, a significant proportion of which concerned the bombing of British military and merchant shipping in the region and the resulting diplomatic furore (e.g. 'Commons: Mr Chamberlain on bombing of British ships in Spain: no reply from Rebels', 28/6/1938). The issue of air power found further expression in the reporting of international calls for the prohibition of the bombing of undefended civilian areas, which was the only significant issue of international diplomacy to feature outside of debates about intervention and non intervention (e.g. 'Bombing of open towns: proposal for British Commission accepted by Franco', 26/7/1983).

Eighteen percent of all items focused on the controversial issues concerning international intervention in the civil war and how to prevent it. The largest proportion of these items concerned the decision-making of the Non Intervention Committee ('Non-intervention: chairman's sub-committee meeting arranged', 20/5/1938), with its plan for the withdrawal of volunteers from Spain agreed on 27 June accruing most of the NIC coverage by the year's-end (e.g. 'Franco's reply to Volunteers Withdrawal Scheme: Lord Plymouth sees Italian, Russian, Portugese & German Representatives', 2/9/1938 ). By comparison there was little reporting of positive or negative opinion about the effectiveness and even-handedness of the Committee and the policy of non intervention more generally, despite the acute and active controversies on both matters at the time (for a rare exception, see 'TU International Federation and Socialist International resolution on ending Non-Intervention', 17/3/1938). However, instances of foreign intervention did receive some prominence, both individual and state sponsored, with the larger proportion reporting Italian and German military support for Franco (e.g. 'French note to Britain on Barcelona air raids: list of 400 German & Italian planes serving Franco', 19/3/1938', 'Italian casualties since March 9<sup>th</sup>', 27/3/1938).

Thirty one percent of all coverage addressed other political actions, interests or responses of governments, politicians and other actors in connection to Spain. Divisions within this category reveal a striking inattentiveness to the political, civil and economic views, actions and needs of the indigenous warring parties in Spain, and also to the wider international community. Overall, BBC coverage privileged a parochial view of the war, emphasizing the experiences and evaluations of British sources (e.g. 'Commons: Mr. Butler on Spanish insurgent attacks on British ships; no reply to British protests' 23/5/1938).

Collectively these findings provide a mixed picture about the BBC's editorial response to official pressures over Spain. Certainly, there is evidence of considerable caution in what was reported. For example, the dominance of the reporting of factual events, in particular military

action, over sources' interpretations and judgments about the war indicates an engagement with the process rather than substance of the conflict. It is difficult to see how anyone entirely reliant on this news source could develop a clear understanding of what was at stake in Spain (a factor compounded by the complete marginalisation of indigenous Spanish sources). Furthermore, a superficial collation of the total amount of coverage of Republican issues to Nationalist issues suggests that any engineered equivalence in covering both sides, had by 1938 tipped in Franco's favour. Fifty nine percent of the items had main themes that addressed Nationalist actions and activities, compared with 15 percent focused upon for Republican actions. But to impute a pro-Franquist imbalance on this basis is problematic for two reasons. First, the difference in the reporting of both sides' military advances and successes was undoubtedly caused by the changing fortunes of the conflict at this time. This was the year that saw decisive military successes for Franco's forces, beginning at the start of the year with their successful repulse of the Republic's major attack at Teruel and then later in resisting and reversing a major Republican offensive in the Ebro Valley, that resulted in a Nationalist drive to the coast that bifurcated the Republic. Second, it is hard to see how the heavy emphasis on Nationalists' air attacks could have worked in Franco's favour, particularly as most reports either emphasised their cost in civilian casualties ('Village between Barcelona & Valencia raided by rebel planes: 100 dead', 5/3/1938) or the threat they posed to the safety of British seamen ('DELLWYN attacked & sunk by rebel planes at Gandeia', 27/7/1938). If the reporting of land advances portrayed the martial potency of the Nationalists and their allies, sustained coverage of their air attacks could only have been seen, at best, as creating an impression of recklessness and indiscriminacy (e.g. 'German planes raid village & kill 2 small girls: Barcelona message', 21/12/1938), particularly in the context of wider public anxieties about the threat that airpower posed to the foundations of civilised society (Bialer, Holman)

These political ambiguities in the BBCs editorial responses were also evident in the reporting of non-intervention and intervention in the conflict. On the one hand, the regular and descriptive reporting of the decisions of the Non Intervention Committee could be said to have legitimated its authority and effectiveness. On the other, nearly as much coverage was given to evidence of, or claims made about, material contraventions of the policy, and which the BBC continued to report even after the supposed success of the NIC's Withdrawal of Volunteers scheme (e.g. 'Bonnet on Ribbenthrop's statement on 3,500 German volunteers in Spain', 14/12/1938). The amount of coverage given to this topic is also remarkable when contrasted with its scant treatment in cinema newsreel coverage at the time. As Aldgate explains all the major newsreel companies of the day tended to avoid the topic for most of the war because of the uncomfortable questions it raised about the efficacy and equity of the policy (Aldgate 121, 130,155, 157, 166-7).

## **News Talks**

Alongside consideration of the content of these bulletins it is also significant to note the amount of coverage that the BBC continued to give to Spain in 1938, in spite of the length of the hostilities (which had an attritional effect on coverage in other news organisations) and the government's stated wish that the topic not be unduly emphasised. The enduring news value of Spain through 1938 for the BBC was also evident in the number of 'News Talks' produced by the News Department, whose number for this year exceeded those for 1937 (23 to 22). The centrepiece of the 1938 talks was a series called 'Both sides of the line'. Its aim was to juxtapose reportage from Republican and Nationalist sides and thereby give 'a picture based on actual personal experience, not political analysis'<sup>xv</sup>. Table 2 details the authorship, timing and content of the talks in this series.

### **Table: 'Both Sides of the Line' BBC News Talks 1938**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Professional Background</b>	<b>Which side?</b>	<b>Subject</b>
25.3.38	Cecil Gerahty	Correspondent for the Daily Mail	Nationalist	A visit to the front line at Oviedo
25.3.38	B.C. Jacob	No information retained by BBC	Republican	No information retained by BBC
18.4.38	Claud Cockburn	Correspondent for the Daily Worker	Republican	Describes a rural community, Perello, near Valencia
18.4.38	Archibald Lyall	Correspondent for the Listener	Nationalist	Visits to the front line near Madrid, then Toledo and Seville
11.6.38	G. Edinger	News Chronicle Journalist	Nationalist	Attends a mass rally before Franco at Saragossa, then visits the village of Amposta near the Ebro, which had recently fallen to the Nationalists
11.6.38	John Langdon-Davies	News Chronicle journalist	Republican	Meets with child refugees in the Pyrenees
27.8.38	Captain A.C. MacDonald	Conservative MP	Republican	Visits the front near Barcelona and then describes the city and its experiences of air attack
27.8.38	Lord Phillimore	Chair of the Catholic society 'Friends of Spain'	Nationalist	Travels to Burgos through the Basque region. Ends by describing his personal meeting with Franco

Several points are worth noting about these contributors and their contributions. First, at least two of the authors, Cecil Gerahty and A.C. MacDonald, had been prominent critics of BBC coverage of Spain. Second, most of the authors had clearly defined public positions regarding the war and its participants. For example, Claude Cockburn was notorious even in Nationalist circles as an open propagandist of the Republic (see McCullagh 108). Gerahty was equally enthusiastic

in propagandising for Franco, having broadcast on Nationalist Radio in Spain, publicised false evidence of a planned Communist revolution prior to the military rebellion and been part of the smear campaign against George Steer, the Times journalist who played a key role in publicising the destruction of Guernica (Southworth, 1977; 1999). Archibald Lyall had used his review of Orwell's 'Homage to Catalonia' in the *Listener* to disparage the Republic and its democratic credentials (Buchanan 2002). MacDonald and Phillimore had both publicly stated their support for the Nationalists, and the latter was the chair of the pro-Nationalist Catholic Society 'Friends of Spain'. John Langdon Davies' pro-Republicanism was clearly evident in his then recently published book on his journalistic experiences in Spain (Langdon Davies). Third, some contributors reported from sides they were not inclined to sympathise with, which created some personal and political discomfiture. For example, MacDonald noted the dilapidated state of the weapons in Republican trenches in Barcelona but shied away from discussing them for fear this would create 'embarrassing' questions about his support for the arms embargo on the Republic. On the Nationalist side, Edinger described how strange it felt not to join in the Fascist salutes to Franco at the mass rally he attended. Fourth, although all contributors avoided overt politicising about the war, in the main emphasising personal experiences and impressions, it was not difficult to draw ignificant political implications from what was described. Both Phillimore and Lyall's pieces portayed Nationalist Spain as well governed, well ordered, and well fed, and Phillimore's piece ended with his personal impressions of the modesty and humility of Franco following their meeting. In contrast, Langdon Davies and Cockburn's pieces both acknowledged the desperate conditions and suffering in Republican Spain, while at the same time paying testament to the equanimity, endurance and thirst for education of the ordinary people whose lives they described.

## **Conclusion**



The broadcast journalist Jonathan Dimbleby once described the BBC's coverage of the Spanish Civil War as 'perhaps the most shameful example' of its News Department's 'timidity' during the 1930s:

It became plain to some in the News Room that there was a huge discrepancy between the techniques which were used to cover the insignificant, and those that were used for what mattered: in the one the craft of the radio reporter was allowed to grow, in the other it was forbidden (Dimbleby 82)

According to Dimbleby, it was only with the arrival at the BBC of his father, Richard Dimbleby, in the late Thirties that things began to change, starting with his ground-breaking broadcasts from the French-Spanish border at Le Perthus, which described the tragic exodus of Republicans from Spain in January 1939 - the sole occasion that the BBC sent its own correspondent to Spain.

The evidence in this article suggests that this charge of timidity does a disservice to the News Department's response to the Spanish crisis. Not least because it fails to give due emphasis to the scale of the pressures the BBC encountered from officials and other sources throughout the war. The British government expected the newly established News Department of the BBC to function in a propagandistic way over Spain, as part of a longer term vision held by Rex Leeper and the Foreign Office news department, in which BBC journalism would get the public thinking 'along sensible lines' and prepare them for what Vansittart called 'the impending tests'. To do so, they expected the BBC to eschew traditional news values and subordinate their professional aspirations to the national interest (as defined by the Foreign Office). Events in Spain intensified these expectations, as international tensions worsened and the unpopularity and ineffectiveness of the government's non intervention policy became ever more apparent.

While there was certainly caution in the News Department's editorial strategies over the war and little apparent creativity in the information relayed via Home news, it is also evident that the broadcast service continued to give prominence to the war for its duration, despite official preferences otherwise, and in doing so often fore-grounded information that was inconvenient to those favouring Franco, or at least seeking to assuage pro-Nationalist opinion (e.g. the coverage of the Nationalists' indiscriminate aerial attacks and their contraventions of the non-intervention agreement). The continued commissioning of news talks on Spain is also remarkable, as these had proven to be a particularly sensitive source of contention with the Foreign Office for several years. The choice of authors for these news talks can also not be seen as conservative and 'safe', as many were known to have strong opinions about the war and some had attracted controversy for them.

I contend that the Spanish Civil War proved a watershed for the BBC News Department, creating conditions ripe for the emergence of a new professional model of broadcast journalism, of which Richard Dimbleby was to be one of the first and influential exponents. Old practices proved outmoded in reporting Spain. In particular, the complete reliance on news agencies for factual reports from Spain only highlighted the deficiencies of these sources. The information flow was uneven, material sent was sometimes contradictory, and it was often difficult to determine the veracity and value of the material received. Moreover, in the processing of this information – deciding what to ignore and what to report – the News Department could not avoid political controversy, inviting allegations of pro-Republicanism and pro-Nationalism in equal measure. These would have provided a powerful incentive for the News Department to seek more self reliance in its news gathering, to impose their own quality standards on the material produced. Although ambitious plans mooted during the period for the creation of a strong cadre of BBC foreign correspondents were not realised in the 1930s, they established a vision for the future development of BBC news provision (Briggs 158). The

continued commissioning of news talks should also be seen as tentative steps towards the realisation of this more active editorial voice.

There is a need to be cautious about overstating the extent to which the BBC resisted government pressure at this time. For example, the ‘propaganda with facts’ favoured by the Foreign Office connected with many of the core BBC editorial values that were being formulated during the interwar years. For the battle for the BBC news service during this period was not just about establishing the terms and conditions of their independence, but also about defining a distinctive professional vision for their news service. This involved reconciling an adherence to facticity and impartiality with a commitment to ‘serving the nation’ and extolling the British democratic way (Scannell and Cardiff).

Whether the BBC’s coverage of the Spanish Civil War galvanised or quietened public concerns in Britain about the events in Spain is difficult to determine on available evidence. At the very least, the BBCs sustained interest in reporting the war helped maintain its prominence in public consciousness. What is beyond doubt is the disquieting effect the BBC’s editorial response to Spain had on British officials, who in attempting to exercise control were forced to confront uncomfortable lessons about the BBCs growing reluctance to accept these limits unquestioningly. The Spanish Civil War provided the first sustained realisation for an emergent public broadcast news service that the interest of officials and the public interest are not necessarily reconcilable, and in the modest attempts made by broadcasters to assert a degree of editorial independence the seeds were sown for a series of intensifying clashes in the post war period – from the Suez crisis in 1955, to the Falklands War in 1982, to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

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<sup>i</sup> The National Archives [TNA] , FO 395/546, Paper p1473/20/150: 220

<sup>ii</sup> 27 January 1936, TNA, FO 395/541, Paper p332/332/150: 74–5.

<sup>iii</sup> TNA, FO 395/547, Paper p2120/20/150: 276 *Emphasis added*

<sup>iv</sup> 13 March 1937, TNA, FO 395/546, Paper p3261/1/150: 22

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<sup>v</sup> Cecil Graves BBC Director of Programmes to Leeper, 26/4/1937, TNA FO 395/547, Paper p2120/20/150: 279

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid* 227

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.* 213, 218

<sup>viii</sup> Reith to Cecil Graves, 9/3/1937 BBC Written Records Archive R34/440

<sup>ix</sup> TNA FO 395/546, Paper p1223/20/150371/546: 218

<sup>x</sup> The correspondent was FA Voigt, Diplomatic correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*. Although no lover of Franco, he was also highly critical of the Republic, which created tensions with other colleagues at the Manchester Guardian, who believed, correctly in my view, that his close working relations with the Foreign Office News Department had compromised his political independence (see Deacon 88-93)

<sup>xi</sup> On 8<sup>th</sup> February 1937, Sir John Reith signed a detailed written response to a letter from the Conservative MP Victor Cazalet that had alleged the BBC was 'unfair' to Franco. In rejecting the claims, Reith said that an in-house investigation of Home news for January 1937 showed that the ratio of items beginning with Republican and Nationalist sources was 13 to 10, respectively; whereas the proportion of agency material received from Republican, neutral and Nationalist sectors was 6, 3 and 1.

<sup>xii</sup> The Republicans controlled the international telephone lines for the majority of the war and it took several months for the Nationalists to secure any access to the international cable system (Deacon 18-21).

<sup>xiii</sup> BBC's alleged Bias: Spanish News, *Manchester Guardian*, 10/2/1937: 14

<sup>xiv</sup> Before December 1937 the bulletins were drawn verbatim from agency material, so no detailed records were kept

<sup>xv</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 19/3/1938: 14