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The British Response to the Spanish Civil War: The Impact of Systemic Pressures on Societal Practices

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Abstract:

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Working from an English School perspective, the aim of this paper is to use the British response to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) to illustrate, on the one hand, how the implementation of established institutional practices play a crucial role in the reproduction or constitution of international society and, on the other, to demonstrate how the implementation of these practices can be distorted by pressures that emanate from the international system. In the first place, therefore, it is hoped that the paper will make a contribution to what Adler and Pouliot are calling the 'practice turn' in International Relations. Indeed, the paper works from the assumption that the English School or international society tradition has played a crucial role in bringing about the 'practice turn' in the field of international relations. Indeed, while the English School has always acknowledged the centrality of institutional practices in the constitution of the international society (Bull, 1977), there is now a growing interest in how the specific practices that constitute the international society have formed and evolved over time (Bain, 2005; Fabry, 2009).

In the second place, however, in addition to examining the role of institutional practices, it is also intended to throw some light on the debate within the English School about the nature and consequences of the international system/society distinction that Bull (1977) initially highlighted. From Bull's perspective, this distinction draws attention to co-existing dimensions of inter-state relations, with the international society focusing on rule governed practices and the international system concentrating on instrumental

power relations. Although Bull did not make much use of the distinction, Buzan (1993) employed it in an effort to theorise two very different ways that rules and practices can emerge in international relations. More recently, however, Buzan (2004) has shifted his position and, drawing on an argument originally developed by James (1993), he dissolves the distinction, and reconfigures the international system as a type of international society. For Buzan, it forms the 'asocial' end point on a spectrum that identifies increasingly homogenous and harmonious international societies. But in this paper, by contrast, the initial distinction is resurrected and, in line with Bull's original formulation, it is presupposed that decision makers are influenced by both systemic and societal forces. So, in the context of the Spanish Civil War, it is argued that although the British response, in the first instance, was intended to follow long-standing institutional practices that have helped to sustain the international society, pressures exerted through the international system had a significant impact on the implementation of these institutional practices and instead of being reinforced, the international society started to unravel.

For most of the twentieth century, Spain played a minor role in world politics, but, as E.H. Carr (1984: 22) has noted, for the duration of the civil war, the country became 'a centre of prime interest and concern in the capitals of Europe'. Carr was in a good position to make this judgement because in 1936 he was still a member of the British Foreign Office and Spain was part of his brief. But it is also not difficult to identify evidence that confirms his assessment. For example, during the first two years of the civil war the conflict was on the agenda of three quarters of the British Cabinet meetings. Moreover, even in the last year of the war, when the outcome seemed a foregone conclusion, Spain was still discussed at half of the Cabinet meetings. Interest in

the Spanish Civil War has certainly not waned in subsequent years. There have now been over fifteen thousand books written on the civil war, which as Graham (2005: preface) observes, represents a 'textual epitaph that puts it on a par with the Second World War'.

Despite the on-going fascination with the Spanish Civil War in other areas of study, the conflict has not played a significant role in the study of international relations. There are very few references to the conflict in contemporary IR literature. At first sight, this general lack of interest is odd, because the conflict was so rapidly internationalised, in ways, moreover, that appear, at least superficially, remarkably similar to the internationalisation of civil wars during the cold war era. So, just as the Spanish Civil War was rapidly internationalised, with the Soviet Union supporting the incumbent Republican Government and Italy and Germany supporting Franco's Nationalist forces, so the United States and the Soviet Union can be regularly observed giving some level of support to opposing sides in civil wars throughout the Cold War. Nevertheless, despite the important and often deadly consequences for the indigenous population that flow from this internationalisation of civil wars, the issue was never studied or at any rate theorised in a sustained and systematic fashion during the cold war. Perhaps the most obvious reasons to account for this persistent low level of interest is because, first, the study of international relations was so state-centric in orientation during the cold war era, when the foundations of the discipline were laid down, thereby making it difficult to accommodate the idea of a civil war, but, second, civil unrest was also generally ignored because there was a preoccupation with what was happening at the centre of the international system rather than in the third world periphery where the civil wars were almost invariably taking place.

Although clearly there were occasions during the cold war when intervention into domestic conflict moved to the top of the international agenda, for example, U.S. intervention into Vietnam or Soviet intervention into Afghanistan, theorists had difficulty accommodating these developments. So Morgenthau (1973) argued, for example, that it was not possible to account for American intervention in terms of his rational theory of international politics and it would be necessary, as a consequence, to formulate a theory of irrationality to account for the U.S. policy in Vietnam. By the same token, Waltz (1979) insisted that there were no systemic pressures on either the United States or the Soviet Union to intervene into peripheral areas of the globe and so intervention could only be accounted for at some other level of theory. Given this kind of orientation, therefore, it becomes less surprising that the study of international relations in the cold war did not often display any particular interest in either civil war in general or, more specifically, civil wars where external intervention has taken place.

It would not, of course, be true to suggest that there was no interest in the internationalisation of civil wars but often the interest was displayed by theorists, such as Rosenau (1964), who wished to challenge the state-centric orientation of the field, or Bull (1984), who was interested in the normative implications of international intervention.[1] Since the end of the cold war, however, attitudes towards intervention have changed very substantially. In particular, a growing preoccupation with humanitarian intervention has reinforced an interest in the normative dimensions of intervention and non-intervention.[2] But this shift in orientation has certainly not given rise to any interest in the Spanish Civil War.

[1] For a review of the literature on intervention in the cold war era see Little (1987, 1993)
[2] See, for example, Wheeler's (2000) text that charts the re-orientation in thinking about intervention.

By contrast, diplomatic historians have made numerous attempts to understand the international responses to the Spanish Civil War, particularly since the 1970s when the relevant public records began to open up. However, there is very little consensus amongst these historians about how to assess the broader significance of the conflict. Although it is often acknowledged that the civil war needs to be treated as 'both the dress rehearsal for and the prelude to the approaching Great Contest' (Deutscher: 1984, xvii-xviii) it is insisted that all too often the war is still simply treated as 'an irrelevant side show' (Finney, 1997: 375) and, from this perspective, the events of central importance are seen to lie elsewhere. However, now the more usual line of argument is that the Spanish Civil War must be seen as a crucial element in the growing instability that developed in Europe across the 1930s. In particular, the conflict needs to be examined in the context of the appeasement strategy implemented by the Western democracies. There are, of course, divergent schools of thought relating to appeasement. The traditional interpretation, often identified as the 'guilty men' thesis, that dominated thinking for several decades after the Spanish Civil War came to a close, viewed the incumbent leaders in the Western democracies as somehow negligent, pursuing strategies that promoted rather than inhibited instability. Viewed through this prism of appeasement, the Spanish Civil War can be seen as 'one of the earliest and most notorious examples of the British and American diplomatic myopia' leading them to throw away 'one of the last opportunities to sidetrack the aggressive designs of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy'(Little, 1985:10). But as the archives opened up, this perspective began to give way to a revisionist line of argument, sometimes characterised as the 'terrible times' thesis, that focused attention on the intractable problems that these decision makers confronted.

Further research and reflection, however, encouraged the development of a post-revisionist position that reasserted the culpability of Western decision makers. So, in the context of the Spanish Civil War, Alpert (1997) argues that these decision makers treated the war as an internal struggle precipitated by the backwardness of Spanish social and economic conditions. As a consequence, the British, in particular, chose to keep their distance from the conflict. But this is not a new line of argument; even at the time, it was insisted that the main aim of the Great Powers was to 'localise' the conflict (Wilcox, 1938). But Alpert insists that this view was myopic because it was clear that the effects of the civil war would not be local and, without doubt, Franco's victory had a substantial impact on European instability with the policies pursued by the Western democracies inadvertently fostering German and Italian power.

It is doubtful if diplomatic historians will ever come to an agreement about why the British, in particular, pursued an appeasement policy. Schroeder (1976), therefore, has argued in favour of coming at the issue from a very different direction. For many years now, Schroeder has endeavoured to move diplomatic history beyond a study of the minutiae of diplomatic exchanges. He has constantly endeavoured to engage with political science and the importance of this endeavour is increasingly acknowledged.[3] What Schroeder (1994: xii) is interested in doing is coming to terms with the 'rules and understandings underlying the practice of international politics'. So, in the context of appeasement, Schroeder (1976:223) argues that he is not interested in the causal factors associated with British appeasement policy in the late 1930s, rather he is interested in 'what kind of policy it was' and he wishes to understand this policy in a 'generic rather than a genetic sense'. At the heart of his argument is the assertion that the appeasement

[3] See, for example, the symposium: History and Theory in *International Security* (1997) 22(1): 5-85.

policy pursued by Britain in the context of Austria and Czechoslovakia did not represent a new departure for Britain, but it reflected a line of policy that the British had followed throughout the nineteenth century in this region. Although the policy had proved successful in the previous century, what the British failed to realise, either at the time or subsequently, was that the success was due to the local international practices that were in operation in the region at that time. These practices, moreover, presupposed the existence of the Austrian Hungarian Empire. With the elimination of the Empire, so the restraint that had characterised relations in the region were also eliminated. There was, as a consequence, no possibility that the traditional British policy could preserve stability in the region, because it had never been the source of stability and, as a consequence, the 1930s appeasement policy was bound to fail.

Schroeder's thesis focuses on central and Eastern Europe and so it cannot be extended to Britain's relations with Spain. Nevertheless, the analysis in this paper starts from a rather similar premise, because it argues that when the Spanish Civil War broke out, Britain responded by endeavouring to implement the generic practices relating to civil wars that have evolved over time in the international society. The paper is divided into three main sections. The first explores the international system/society distinction that has been deployed within the English School. The second section examines how the practices relating to civil war have evolved. Finally, drawing on the previous two sections, the third section looks at how the British responded to the outbreak and development of the Spanish Civil War.

The system/society distinction

An international system, according to Bull, identifies states that are 'in regular contact with one another and where in addition there is interaction between them, sufficient to make the behaviour of each a necessary element in the calculation of the other' (Bull 1977 [2002]:4). By contrast, an international society presupposes that states are, on the one hand, 'conscious of certain common interests and common values' and, on the other, 'conceive of themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions' (Bull 2002, 13). The distinction is frequently referred to whenever Bull's work is discussed. But having noted the distinction, attention is then almost invariably focused on his conception of international society. There is, in other words, very little attempt to examine the significance of the distinction. Yet as Vigezzi (2005) makes clear, the distinction is one that had long exercised Bull in his discussions with the other members of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics - the precursor of the English School.

Before trying to clarify what Bull meant by the distinction, it is worth noting that there is widespread agreement among contemporary theorists working from an English school perspective that the distinction between system and society is unhelpful and should be dispensed with. The agreement is significant, moreover, because it extends across the very diverse analytical perspectives that are now embraced by the school. James (1993), who initiated the attack on the distinction, insisted that it is simply not possible to conceive of an international system that does not embrace the features that Bull associates with the existence of an international society. By the same token, any meaningful conception of an international society must make the systemic assumption

that its members will take each other's behaviour into account. It follows, according to James, that Bull has set up a false dichotomy and the most practical step is to discard the idea of an international system because it is the societal dimension that needs attention.

Jackson (2000:113-6), on the other hand, accepts that the two terms point up a useful distinction, but he argues that it is better captured by distinguishing between instrumental and non-instrumental behaviour. Instrumental behaviour is based on strategic conceptions of self-interest that necessarily take the actions of other actors into consideration. Failure to take account of others will all too easily give rise to self-defeating strategies. By contrast, non-instrumental behaviour is based on legal and moral obligations that necessarily embrace the legitimate interests of others who will be affected by this behaviour. Jackson accepts that both forms of behaviour need to be accommodated in any analysis of international society. He objects to the use of international systems terminology, however, because it too easily gives rise to a mechanistic view of behaviour that encourages what Jackson considers to be the utterly mistaken notion that human beings can be pushed around by social structures. However, he insists that when Bull refers to the international system he is not suggesting that human behaviour can be structurally determined.

Buzan (2004:98-108) provides a third significant discussion of the distinction. He acknowledges Jackson's view that Bull is endeavouring to capture two distinctive types of social behaviour, but he insists, nevertheless, that Jackson fails to get at the essence of Bull's position on the international system which does represent a 'physical mode of interaction typical of the mechanistic, realist-style analyses of the balance of power as an automatic process rooted in the relative material capabilities of states' (Buzan,2004:99).

From Buzan's perspective, thefore, Bull's view of the international system corresponds almost exactly with the one adopted by Waltz (1979). But if this is how Bull thought about an international system then it is ironic that he anticipated Waltz's approach but has been credited with promoting an approach that eschews and undermines Waltzian thinking. Bull, however, failed to anticipate the full structural logic that Waltz (1979) was to articulate. Nevertheless, it does seem that this was the logic that Bull was driving at, alhough the nature of the logic becomes much clearer in the wake of Waltz's *Theory of International Politics.* But Buzan argues, in line with Jackson, that Bull's view of an international system can be captured perfectly well as a type of international society, thereby rendering the need for a system/society divide redundant. Buzan (2004, 190-195) equates Bull's international system with an asocial society, which is located at one end of a spectrum that then embraces a coexistence international society, a cooperative international society, through to a convergence international society, where all states share the same values.

Despite extensive support for Buzan's position, however, it is still contested (Dunne, 2005; Little, 2007). The difficulty with re-labelling the international system as an international society and locating it within a typology of international societies is that it fails to accommodate the complexity of the divide in Bull's thinking. Although Bull presupposes that an international system can exist in the absence of an international society, he also asserts that every international society is necessarily underpinned by an international system. He wants to establish a framework that helps to make sense of the last few centuries in international politics and at the heart of his position is the belief that the essentially power political orientation associated with the international system and

institutional orientation associated with international society, co-exist and that both exert a significant influence on decision makers who are responsible for managing international relations. It is very apparent, moreover, that Bull is not just conceiving of the international system as a hypothetical, akin to the state of nature; on the contrary, he presupposes that the international system and the international society co-exist.

Bull insists that international politics is constituted by a mix of divergent and sometimes competing practices that contribute to a complex and multidimensional reality. He argues, moreover that there are theorists who have captured the essential elements of the practices that he associates with an international system and the practices that he associates with an international society. So 'the element of war and struggle for power among states' that he associates with an international system needs to be distinguished from 'the element of co-operation and regulated intercourse among states' that he associates with an international society (Bull, 2002,39). The thinking of theorists associated with both of these two traditions of thought is seen to have evolved over the past five hundred years and helps to capture the essence of the changing reality of world politics that has gone on during this period. Bull (2002,49) insists, therefore, that it is important not to reify either of these elements, so, for example, 'it is always erroneous to interpret events as if international society were the sole or the dominant element'.[4] From this perspective then, the international system and the international society are defined by different sets of practices

[4] Bull further complicates the argument by pointing to the existence of transnational practices that can be observed in world society and that coexist with the practices that can be observed in the international system and the international society.

Civil wars and the recognition of new states

Although members of the English School have always acknowledged the centrality of institutional practices in the constitution of the international society, it is only very recently that there have been any detailed studies of how the specific practices that constitute the international society have formed and evolved over time. This section draws heavily on Fabry's analysis of the institutional practices associated with the formation of new states because these practices, it is suggested here, are frequently closely entwined with the practices that are related to how civil wars are handled in the international society. Although Fabry makes reference to civil wars, this is not the focal point of his interest. What Fabry attempts to do is to demonstrate that establishing the statehood or sovereignty of a new state in the contemporary international society necessarily involves the practice of recognition on the part of the established sovereign states in the society. Fabry, moreover, traces the origins of this practice back to the end of the eighteenth century and the start of the nineteenth century. It can be argued, therefore, that from this perspective these practices are very closely associated with the constitution of the contemporary international society.

In advocating the study of state practice, Fabry self-consciously employs what Hedley Bull identified as a 'classical approach' to the study of international relations. Although Fabry does not use this terminology, he essentially adopts a hermeneutic approach that draws in the main on primary documentation in order to investigate how practitioners have dealt with the task of managing inter-state relations. In contrast to mainstream social scientists, he is not interested in trying to establish causal models; what he wants to do is to show that practitioners have managed to formulate established and

agreed procedures that essentially legitimise their on-going practices. These practices, however, have evolved across time and reflect the fact that international relations, contrary to the views of contemporary realists, such as John Mearsheimer, take place within embedded normative structures. At the same time, Fabry is well aware that international decision making occurs in complex circumstances and so although he is primarily interested in examining the norms and reasoning associated with international practice, he also acknowledges that practitioners have to take into account the wider political concerns and consequences of these practices. There is, therefore, an implicit appreciation that it is necessary to take account of systemic as well as societal pressures.

According to Fabry, the state practices that linked recognition to the establishment of new states began to emerge once European states began to acknowledge that they were part of a larger international society of sovereign states. More specifically, this development is inextricably linked to the point in time when positive law began to overtake natural law as a defining institution of this nascent international society. This development occurred in the eighteenth century and Fabry accepts Alexandrowicz's (1959) argument that the issue of recognition became salient because the legitimacy of dynasticism gradually came under challenge at that time. During the dynastic era a new state could only legitimately come into existence with the acquiescence of the dynastic owner of the territory. The recognition of the United States is interesting in this context because although the emergence of this revolutionary state clearly posed a fundamental challenge to the very idea of dynastic legitimacy, France, still a dynastic state, nevertheless, provided the revolutionaries with assistance. No doubt the assistance reflected the importance of systemic practices, that played a crucial role even, or from

Schroeder's (1994) perspective, especially, in the dynastic era, but established societal practices still remained essentially intact and recognition of the United States by France and most of the other European states was only forthcoming after the British acknowledgement of the new state and so established dynastic practices were not undermined by the emergence of this revolutionary state. Moreover, despite the subsequent threat to dynastic legitimacy posed by the emergence of the French revolutionary state as well as the challenge to the idea of an international society of sovereign states raised by Napoleonic expansion, dynastic legitimacy was essentially re-confirmed in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna but, albeit at the expense of some inconsistency, within the agreed framework of an international society of states.

Fabry's thesis rests on the dual assertion that not only can contemporary thinking about the practice of state recognition be traced back for over two hundred years but also that the practices have throughout this period been indivisibly linked to the idea of self-determination. State recognition and self-determination are, as Fabry puts it, two sides of the same coin. From this perspective then, the practice of recognition is closely associated with the emergence of a liberal international order and, as a consequence, Anglo-American thinking played a crucial role in establishing this practice and helping to shape its evolution. Fabry's thesis, therefore, reinforces the argument advanced by a range of very different theorists, such as Morgenthau, Schroeder, Osiander and Teschke, who all argue that the modern international arena dates back to the start of the nineteenth century rather than to1648 and the Treaty of Westphalia.

Although the emergence of the United States posed a long-term challenge to established recognition practices, Fabry argues that dynastic legitimacy was most

seriously undermined, in the first instance, in Latin America. By the mid 1830s, twelve new states, all but Brazil constituted as democratic republics, had emerged as fully fledged members of the international society. This significant development was associated with a substantial transformation in recognition practices as spearheaded by the United States and Britain. Both states explicitly repudiated the practices associated with dynastic legitimacy that were being promoted at that time in Europe and which Spain and Portugal wished to extend to their overseas possessions in Latin America. However, the United States and Britain successfully brought into play a very different set of practices that were then to provide the foundations for recognition of new states over the next two hundred years. By contrast, the practices associated with dynastic legitimacy atrophied and had essentially disappeared by the start of the twentieth century. But the Latin American cases are also important because the British and Americans also operated on the basis of common practices about how to respond to civil wars.

In the aftermath of the Congress of Vienna, the dynastic European states were agreed that if they came under challenge from internal revolutionary forces then they had a right to expect intervention from other dynastic powers in order to suppress the revolution. But Britain and the United States challenged the existence of this right and argued, instead, that external intervention into what constituted a civil war in another state was not admissible. When the Latin American territories of Spain and Portugal demanded their independence, therefore, the British and the Americans operated on the basis of very similar assumptions and practices. Both accepted that the struggles for independence in Latin America constituted civil war and that Spain and Portugal had the right to demand respect for their territorial sovereignty. But at the same time, both Britain

and the United States were clear that these states had no right to expect intervention by others to help them to suppress these demands for independence. On the contrary, they acknowledged that there was a right to self-determination on the part of the peoples of Latin America. The appropriate response for third parties, therefore, was identified as one of non-intervention and neutrality, thereby defending both the sovereign rights of the parent state and the right to self-determination on the part of a community. There was, however, a desire to establish some continuity with the dynastic era. So, for example, when the British decision was being made to recognise the new states in Latin America, the despatches from Paris to London that were sent from between 1774 to 1778 were examined to ascertain 'the different steps by which France and Spain advanced successively to a recognition of our American colonies and our cooperation with them'. The despatches revealed that neither France nor Spain established official relations with the Americans 'until after the treaties of amity' (Stapleton, vol. 1, 95-6). But Britain and the United States were clear that sovereignty could not indefinitely trump self-determination. It was argued that if those seeking self-determination establish a *de facto* state, then both countries considered the community to have earned the right to recognition to sovereign status but only over the territory that they controlled and subject to a willingness to satisfy conditions that were considered to be in the general interest of the international society. What Fabry then goes on to show is that while the commitment to self-determination persisted, the other practices associated with the recognition of new states were substantially modified or even overturned during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

By contrast, the practices relating to international responses to civil war remained largely intact up to the Cold War, having been firmly entrenched during the era when the Latin American states were formed and recognised. However, it was not only in Latin America where these practices were being institutionalised. The British were also attempting to bring identical practices into play within Europe. But in this context, however, the endeavour brought them much more directly into confrontation with the dynastic states that were determined to maintain and exercise the right to intervene in support of any European dynasty being challenged by revolutionary forces. Viscount Castlereagh wrote a robust rejoinder to the 1820 Troppau Protocol issued by Prussia, Russia along with Austria, that endeavoured to legitimise the ubiquitous right to suppress revolution; Castlereagh argued that it was objectionable in principle and unworkable in practice. Nevertheless, the 1823 French intervention into Spain in order to consolidate the position of the Bourbon dynasty was sanctioned by the Congress of Verona in 1822, despite strong British objections. Moreover, the threat of a joint intervention by France and Spain to restore Latin America to Europe encouraged Britain to approach the United States in an attempt to present a united front against this potential intervention. The United States, however, preferred to make an independent declaration which was presented in the President's Annual Message to Congress on December 2, 1823 and is now known as the Monroe Doctrine. Nevertheless, Britain and the United States agreed in principle that when confronted by a civil war, other states in the international society should observe the norm of nonintervention and pursue a policy of neutrality. Although this was broadly the policy that Britain pursued during the American Civil War, the North always denied that the conflict was a civil war. Nevertheless, after the war, United

States acknowledged the legitimacy of the British position but then demanded compensation for what were deemed to be breaches by the British of their own position of neutrality (Little, 2007). When we turn to the British response to the Spanish Civil War, however, a much more complex picture emerges.

The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939

The political struggle between right and left has been a perennial feature of modern history in Spain. The first Spanish Republic was brought to an end by the army in 1875 and it was over fifty years before the Republicans regained control in Spain. A second republic was established peacefully in April 1931, largely because the king had lost the support of the army. But the new republican government still confronted insuperable problems. Right-wing elements were prepared to tolerate the republic, provided their privileges were untouched, whereas left-wing elements saw the republic as the first stage in the overthrow of the established social and political order. The centre-right government, confronted by growing violence and unable to exercise effective power, held an election on February 16, 1936. A popular front coalition, linking left and centre parties, established a new government, but it was unable to stem the rising disorder. In July, the army mutinied in Morocco. The mutiny quickly spread to mainland Spain and was successful almost everywhere apart from Madrid and Barcelona, but this resistance was sufficient to ensure the survival of the republican government and a military coup was transformed into a civil war between republican forces and the nationalist forces under General Franco. The speed with which Britain announced a policy of non-intervention has been extensively debated by diplomatic historians. In

practice, the war was soon internationalised with Franco receiving support from Germany and Italy and the Soviets supplying aid to the Republicans. Nevertheless, because British policy worked against the incumbent Republican government, there is a widespread presupposition that the British government covertly favoured the Franco forces, primarily because of his hostility to communism and, as a consequence, British policy was characterised in Parliament at the time as 'malevolent neutrality' and has on many occasions subsequently been couched in similar terms.[5]

A detailed analysis of the primary sources, however, provides evidence for a very different interpretation of the British response. The British decision makers were, in fact, significantly influenced by long established practices for responding to civil war that occur in the international society. From this perspective, the right to self-determination overrides the rights of sovereignty once it is established that there is a civil war taking place, rather than a revolt or an uprising. As it happens, it did not take long for the British to define the situation in Spain in terms of a civil war. News of an attempted army coup in Spain was received on 17 July 1936 and it was acknowledged 'that fighting is widespread and that the issue of the struggle between rebel military forces and Government forces is still uncertain'.[6] The following month, the conflict was being identified in the Foreign Office as a 'civil war'.[7] Reports that the Nationalists had consolidated their hold in Northern Spain led the Foreign Office to predict 'a long drawn-out conflict'.[8]

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[5] This position has been more forcefully presented by Douglas Little(1985, 1988)
[6] 23.7.1936, FO/371/20525/W7223
[7] 8.14.1936, Pollock's memo. FO/20530/W8509
[8] 8.6.1936, Leigh Smith memo. FO/20526/W8509

But from the start it was acknowledged that the civil war did not simply raise the issue of self-determination. There were obviously potential systemic consequences. There were concerns that the civil war could result in the country being divided. A Foreign Office official insisted that 'The maintenance of the integrity of Spain is certainly a British interest in the present circumstances, because if Spain were to disintegrate, the separate parts might very well fall under the control of one or other foreign country'.[9] But there were other concerns voiced almost immediately in Cabinet. Eden, the Foreign Secretary, suggested that the Nationalists seemed to be gaining the upper hand and that there was 'some danger that the civil war might end with a Government in power somewhat resentful of our attitude'.[10] It was also pointed out that the Italians would regard the conflict in Spain 'not only as a struggle between Communism and Fascism but also and primarily as a field in which she might find herself able to strengthen her own influence and weaken Britain's sea power in the Western Mediterranean.'[11] The military were clear that in the event of a future war, it was essential to maintain friendly links with Spain or at the very least secure her neutrality. It was argued that if Spain became an enemy of Britain and permitted hostile forces to operate from Spain, it would make Britain's position very precarious because of the crucial role played by Gibraltar in maintaining the imperial links that depended on access to the Mediterranean. By the same token, if the harbours on the Spanish Atlantic seaboard were in enemy hands, then Britain's communications with the Americas would also be rendered vulnerable.

The fact that the civil war in Spain was so quickly seen to have wider international systemic ramifications made it much more difficult to determine how to

[9] 1.11.1937, Sargent memo. FO/371/21285/W3322
[10] 10.28.1936, *Cabinet Papers,* 23/86
[11] 8.31.1936, *Cabinet Papers*, 24/264

respond to the conflict. Nevertheless, from an early stage it was agreed by the military as well as the Foreign Office that the British should abide by their long established policy of nonintervention. Lord Cranbourne, an Under Secretary of State, acknowledged that the 1820 White Paper written by the Foreign Secretary, Lord Castlereagh, in response to the Troppau Protocol, established nonintervention as a basic tenet of British foreign policy.[12] Although the British favoured a policy of nonintervention, Eden, the Foreign Secretary, argued initially that the British were in a strong position to act as a mediator because the 'victory of either extreme would be most unwelcome to us so that we must be up and doing in favour of compromise whenever opportunity affords'.[13] By this time, however, the British were already heavily involved in the attempt to implement the French suggestion of a collaborative policy to prevent arms from reaching either side in the Spanish Civil War.[14]

Initially, the Foreign Office reaction to the French proposal was rather cool. Mounsey argued that it would be a mistake to '*tie our hands* to any agreement which is not practically universal'.[15] Another Foreign Office official noted that the British should remain 'completely impartial and free to pursue the policy of nonintervention'.[16] But the French plan was soon being given serious consideration. One official commented that while there were 'several possible courses of action ... assistance to the rebels must of

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[12] Northedge, 1966,441

[13] 9.3.1936 Eden memo FO/371/20537/W10351 5/22. It is worth noting that the British were also anxious to pursue a policy of mediation in the context of the American Civil War. See Little (2007) and Brauer (1972)

[14] For decades after the civil war, there was a significant debate about who first the proposed a policy of non-intervention. As Carlton (1971:40) argued, those on the left presupposed that the Popular Front Government in France only went along with the policy 'under pressure from the right-wing British Government'. It is now generally accepted that the French acted on its own initiative. See also Gallagher (1971) and Warner (1972). For a recent account endorsing this position, see Stone (2005).

[15] 8.2.1936 FO/371/20526/W7504 5/23

[16] 8.2.1936, Mounsey to Halifax, FO/371/ 20526/W7504

course be ruled out as contrary to all our principles of correctness and justice'.[17] The British initially suggested informal conversations amongst the major powers. The Italians, however, called for a commission. Although the Germans rejected this suggestion, the British set up an internal interdepartmental committee to handle the issue of nonintervention and then within a few days they succeeded in getting general international agreement on a Nonintervention Committee that would meet in London.[18] The aim of the committee was to establish and police an arms embargo.

Although the British initiated the standard practice for dealing with civil wars, by adopting a policy of non-intervention and endeavouring to ensure that all other states complied with this practice, they soon began to diverge from established procedures. Soon after the military insurrection, for example, the Republican government indicated that they were going to establish a blockade. Shuckburgh argued that an effective blockade amounted to a recognition by the Republicans of the belligerent status of the Nationalists.[19] A direct parallel then existed with the American civil war and it was acknowledged that this was the leading precedent.[20] In the wake of the Northern states implementing a blockade of the Southern States, the British argued that this was tantamount to a declaration of war and a recognition by the North that they were engaged in a civil war, and on this basis they accorded the Southern States with belligerent status. In the context of Spain, however, the British insisted that the legality of the blockade could only be established after the insurgents had been granted belligerent status by the

[17] 8.19.1936, Mounsey to Cadogan, FO/371/20573/W9717
[18] 9.3.1936 FO/371/20575/W10587; Kleine-Ahlbrandt, 1962,13 5/27, 5/26
[19] 8.13.1936 FO/371/20530.W8554 3/39
[20] 8.10.1936 FO/371/20529/W8234 3/40

British.[21] But the government proved unwilling to take this step. Although the need to grant belligerent status to the Nationalist Government was discussed throughout the civil war, the time was never considered to be appropriate and so the move was pushed into the future. The Cabinet failed to respond to the blockade because it wanted a more dramatic development to justify the decision.

In mid-October, for example, the Cabinet decided to recognize the insurgents as belligerents when they captured Madrid.[22] But the Republicans managed to hold Madrid at this time. In the meantime, Germany and Italy announced on 18 November that they were granting the Nationalist Government *de jure* status. But this move was certainly not in line with established practice. As a consequence, Eden was forced to rethink the existing policy. He decided to delay granting belligerent status because it would leave the Government open to the charge that Britain was following in the wake of the dictators' policy. But the Government was also constrained by domestic factors. As Chamberlain, the Prime Minister argued, the following year, if Franco was granted belligerent status, at that juncture, then the government's opponents would argue that the move 'revealed the Government's policy in its true light, which they had always claimed was support for Franco'.[23] The failure to give *de facto* recognition to the Nationalist Government was a source of persistent irritation within the Foreign Office. One official noted in frustration that 'ever since September 1936, by our whole course of action we have admitted and could not deny that there was a war and that Franco was a party'.[24] Towards the end of the civil war a member of the Foreign Office suggested that if belligerent rights were

[21] 8.13.1936 FO/371/20530/W8554 3/41
[22] 10.21.1936, *Cabinet Papers*, 23/85
[23] 6.30.1937 *Cabinet Papers* 23/88 6/109
[24] 2.17.1938, Beckett memo. FO/371/22635/W738

eventually to be accorded, then it would represent the 'crowning illogicality of the whole treatment of the Spanish Civil War' because it would occur 'at that moment when the war seems likely to end by the defeat of one side'.[25]

The inconsistent position adopted by the British, maintaining a neutral stance with respect to the Republicans and the Nationalists, via the Nonintervention Committee, while failing to grant belligerent status to the Nationalists rendered them vulnerable to criticism from both sides. But the issue was complicated by the fact that the Germans and Italians, and then the Russians, were violating the arms embargo. It was clear that they were working on the basis of systemic considerations and had no interest in working within the normative framework provided by the international society. The Republicans complained that the British arms embargo had much larger consequences for them, because of the external military support being given to the Nationalists. A Foreign Office official accepted that it was difficult to respond to this argument, except to indicate that 'the political consequences of giving the legal government the facilities to which it is undoubtedly entitled would have been far too great to have been risked'.[26] British Cabinet members endeavoured to justify the position by portraying the Soviet Union as the main violator of the nonintervention policy. After Eden made this argument in the House of Commons, the War Office expressed surprise because it was not consistent with their evidence. There was also concern that Eden's statement would be used by Germany and Italy to justify their policies.[27] When Eden was informed that the Foreign Office was also keeping a record of the infringements of the nonintervention agreement, he noted

[25] 3.22.1938, Beckett memo. FO/371/22641/W4211
[26] 9.7.1936 FO/371/20575/W10779 3/43
[27] 11.23.1936 FO/371/20586/W16391 7/72 See also fn 178

‘Glad, for I may have to justify my scarcely veiled allusions to the House today’.[28] But over time, the reluctance to recognise the Franco regime grew. It was argued that by ‘granting belligerent rights to Franco under pressure we should undoubtedly be regarded in Europe as recognising the success not of him, but of Italy and Germany’.[29] It was argued that only after the German and Italian troops had been removed could Franco’s belligerent status be recognised.

As the conflict in Spain persisted, however, and the general situation in Europe deteriorated, doubts emerged about the prevailing policy within the Cabinet. The societal implications of policy were subordinated to systemic considerations. By the start of 1937, Eden argued that Spain had become an international battleground and that ‘the character of the future Government of Spain has now become less important to the peace of Europe than that the dictators should not be victorious in that country’.[30] By contrast, Lord Halifax reduced Spain to a ‘tactical situation’ where it was important not to ‘lose sight of the main *disideratum* of not allowing our relations with Italy and Germany to deteriorate’.[31] Eden disagreed and argued that future relations with Germany would be conducted ‘with very much greater advantage to ourselves if we had demonstrated beyond all possible doubt that in the Mediterranean there is a point beyond which the United Kingdom cannot be drawn by sapping and mining or by bluster and threats’.[32] Throughout 1937, it is clear from Eden’s comments on Foreign Office documents that he is becoming increasingly disenchanted with and isolated from the prevailing British position. A Foreign Office official, for example, complains that ‘instead of trying to wean

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[28] 11.18.1936 FO/371/20585/W15880 7/73
[29] 7.6.1937 FO/371/21296/W13036 7/83
[30] 1.8.1937 *Cabinet* Papers 24/267 9/150
[31] 6.30.1937 FO/371/21296/W12187 9/151
[32] 12.14.1936 *Cabinet Papers* 24/265 9/152

General Franco away from the increasing German and Italian influence they (the Russians) have under the cover of non-intervention thrown him more into their arms'. Eden notes 'There are others who think that the democracies should have done more to help the Government, thus obviating this danger'.[33] By the start of 1938, Eden's position had become untenable and he resigned in February.[34]

Although the Nonintervention Committee failed to prevent foreign intervention into the Spanish Civil War, it did pose an effective barrier to the establishment of an Anglo-Italian agreement. Despite the general consensus that an agreement could not be put in place prior to a settlement in Spain, there was no consensus about what would constitute a settlement. In May 1937, Eden had argued that the objective of the Nonintervention Committee would only be realised when the 'last foreigner' had been withdrawn and 'that unhappy country has been allowed to settle her own destiny in her own way'.[35] Some Foreign Office officials argued, however, that Britain should threaten to leave the committee if Germany and Italy failed to accept British proposals that were being put forward. But Lord Cranborne argued that 'To take the initiative in breaking an agreement which has the overwhelming support of public opinion in this country and has after all fulfilled its main purpose of stabilizing a dangerous situation would be a great gamble'.[36] This position held though 1937, but after Eden's resignation, the Prime Minister argued that he had never assumed that the elimination of foreign troops from Spain was the *sine qua non* for an agreement with Italy.[37] The agreement with Italy was established in April 1938, pending a settlement of the Spanish question. But the British

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[33] 12.23.1937 FO/371/21302/W22043 9/155
[34] 2.20.1938 *Cabinet Papers* 23/92 9/156
[35] 7.19.1938 FO/371/22651/W10243 9/144
[36] 6.7.1937 FO/371/21335/W11004 9/147
[37] 3.2.1938 *Cabinet Papers* 23/92 9/143

decision makers were unable to agree on the definition of such a settlement. By the start of 1939, Cadogan was expressing irritation that the French would not let the Spanish War 'fizzle out'. Since it was clear that Franco was going to win, French policy 'merely prolongs the fighting - allowing Mussolini to dig further in'.[38]

But within weeks the war did come to an end; however, British systemic concerns persisted. With the onset of the Second World War, Britain's main concern was to ensure that Franco pursued a policy of neutrality and did not side with Germany and Italy. For Franco, the continuation of the alliance forged during the civil war depended on the willingness of Germany and Italy to sanction Spanish imperial expansion. Franco's imperial ambitions led to an unprompted offer to enter the war on the side of the axis powers. But Hitler was unwilling to satisfy Franco's ambitions. As Rees (2003, 639) notes, 'far from playing a canny game to stay out of the war, Franco only avoided a disastrous intervention because of the reluctance of the Germans and Italians to accept Spain as a co-belligerent'.[39]

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates the contradictory consequences that can arise from an unsuccessful attempt to coordinate a policy of nonintervention at the international level. As soon as the British recognised that Spain was engulfed by civil war, their immediate response was to fall back on the practice of nonintervention, using the American civil war as the exemplar. The failure of the Germans, Italians, and later the Soviets, to follow a similar policy complicated the issue because the British were

[38] 1.25.1939 FO/371/24115/W1471 9/168

[39] For a detailed account of Britain's relations with Spain at this time, see Smyth (1986). See also Goda's (1993) intriguing account of Hitler's interest in Gibraltar in 1940.

unprepared for war and needed to establish some kind of *modus vivendi* with these states. In particular, they wished to establish an agreement with Italy, in an effort to move the balance of power in Britain's favour. Systemic factors therefore impacted on normative considerations. The Nonintervention Agreement helped initially to maintain a consensus within the cabinet and to mask the growing divisions about how best to manage the rising systemic tensions within Europe. The resignation of Eden revealed how wide these divisions had become. Although the argument made at the time, that the Cabinet was using the Nonintervention Agreement as a devise to assist Franco, is now often accepted, the failure to give Franco *de facto* recognition and the refusal to reach an agreement with Italy before a settlement was reached in Spain suggest that the issue was more complex than this assessment recognises. Franco was denied recognition because it would signal that Britain had fallen into line with Germany and Italy. On the other hand, the inability to reach an agreement with Italy, without a settlement in Spain, indicates that the Nonintervention Agreement had created a self-imposed restraint on the British.

Krasner insists that it is impossible for any institutional arrangement at the international level to become embedded and that, as a consequence, international norms have always been associated with organized hypocrisy because of the persistent decoupling between principles and practices.[40] The decoupling takes place when statesmen find that it is in their interests to do so. So norms are the equivalent to the default mechanism on the computer. Norms are followed, but only when they do not interfere with state interests. From Krasner's perspective, interests always trump norms. However, Krasner accepts that states do not wish to be seen to be violating norms and so will almost invariably endeavour to maintain that they are not violating norms. There

[40] Krasner 1999, 220 and 226

will, therefore often be a discrepancy not only between principle and practice, but also between talk and action. The difficulty with this line of argument is that it fails to provide an adequate account for the durability of norms. By contrast, members of the English school argue that the norms associated with primary institutions such as sovereignty and nonintervention are so firmly embedded that they play a crucial role in constituting a society of states. The case study provides more support for the English school than for Krasner. British decision makers do seem to have been socialised into accepting the institutional and constitutive status of nonintervention. There was a deepseated preoccupation with the practices associated with nonintervention. Moreover, Krasner's assumption that statesmen will simply ignore these rules when it is in their interests to do so fails to recognize how profoundly the practices are implicated in the process of defining the situation that the decision makers find themselves in. Systemic pressures undoubtedly affected societal practices, but they did not overwhelm them.

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