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# Leon Blum and the Spanish Civil War

M. D. Gallagher

The decision of Léon Blum not to intervene in the Spanish Civil War is one which has given rise to numerous commentaries and explanations on both sides of the Channel, but hitherto the events which led to that decision have been the subject of considerable controversy. On 22 July 1936, Blum was determined to send support to the Republicans in Spain; on 8 August, France proposed the Non-Intervention Pact; between these two dates, Blum was in London for two days. What brought about this change of attitude? Was Blum's visit to London the decisive factor? To what extent was his decision influenced by the attitude of the British Government?

Blum's visit to London had been expected for some time before war broke out in Spain. It was already clear in June 1936 that he wished to meet Eden in order to demonstrate Anglo-French cooperation in the early stages of his new government. He was aware of the impression generally prevalent in Europe, and more especially in Britain, summed up by Sir George Clerk, Ambassador in Paris, that 'for the time being France is a sleeping partner in international affairs'<sup>1</sup>, and the unhappy feeling created in France by this impression was accentuated by the comment that 'London seems to share the opinions of Rome and Berlin, echoed throughout the smaller European capitals, that, for the time being, internal difficulties will render France a negligible factor in the European equation'.<sup>2</sup> Although Blum and Eden had met at the British Embassy in Paris on 25 June, the French premier and Delbos, his Foreign Minister, urged that the two sides should meet again, together with the Belgians, in a preliminary conference prior to the forthcoming five-power meeting with Germany to negotiate a new Locarno. Again, it is clear that the British considered this anxiety to be an indication of the desire of the French Government to

<sup>1</sup> Public Record Office, FO, Clerk to Hoare, 11 June 1936. C 4355/1/17.

<sup>2</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 18 June 1936.

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strengthen its standing: 'The Government was weak and wanted to show that they counted for something, at any rate with the United Kingdom'.<sup>3</sup> Despite the evident lack of enthusiasm on the British side, it was finally decided to hold a meeting in London on 23 July to discuss a European settlement. 'The object of this meeting will be to examine the situation and to consider how best to further the desire of the Three Powers to consolidate the peace of Europe by means of a general settlement.'<sup>4</sup>

It would seem from this that Blum's purpose in visiting London was not to discuss Spain.<sup>5</sup> The news of the outbreak of the war, which reached him in Giral's telegram of 20 July requesting assistance, arrived when he was already preparing to go to London, and came as a complete surprise. His immediate sympathy went to the Republicans, as the legal government, but he was only too well aware of the dangers of translating this sympathy into concrete terms, dangers for both France and Europe. As he noted later: 'Was it possible for us to help the legal government of Spain without Hitler and Mussolini helping the rebels?'<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, he came swiftly to the decision to help. Between 20 and 22 July, in spite of the strong sympathy for Franco already being expressed on the Right, Blum, in collaboration with Delbos and Daladier, then Minister of Defence, drew up a plan for sending arms to Spain. This seems to be confirmed by a leak to the German Ambassador, Welczeck, who cabled to Berlin on 23 July: 'I have learned in strict confidence that the French Government declared itself prepared to supply the Spanish Government with considerable amounts of war material during the next few days. Approximately 30 bombers, several thousand bombs, a considerable number of 75 mm. guns etc., are involved.'<sup>7</sup> The same evening Welczeck telephoned Berlin to say that this report had been confirmed. It is clear that before going to London, Blum had reached his decision on military aid to Spain, although for the moment it was known only to a restricted few.

<sup>3</sup> Cabinet meeting, 16 July 1936. PRO, Cab. 53 (36) I. 116.

<sup>4</sup> Preliminary communiqué. *The Times*, 22 July 1936.

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Thomas indicates, however, that Baldwin urged Blum to accompany Delbos to London in order to discuss Spain (Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 287-8). The same account appears in the American State Department Papers on Foreign Policy, 1936, II, 447-9.

<sup>6</sup> *Le Populaire*, 15 October 1945.

<sup>7</sup> *Documents of German Foreign Policy*. Series D, III, *Germany and the Spanish Civil War 1936-39*, document no. 3.

Blum arrived in London on 23 July and left the following day. The official talks were concerned only with those problems outlined in the preliminary communiqué, but the question of Spain did arise outside these conversations. Upon his arrival, Blum was asked by a French journalist, Pertinax, if it was true that he was sending arms to the Spanish Republicans. When Blum confirmed this, Pertinax informed him that this was a policy not favoured by the British Government, to which Blum replied: 'That's quite possible, I really have no idea; but in any case, that is the policy we shall follow.'<sup>8</sup> Before his departure, he was visited in his hotel by Eden, who also asked him if he intended to supply arms to the Republicans. On learning that this was indeed Blum's intention, Eden's only comment was: 'It's your business, but I beg you to be careful.'<sup>9</sup>

It is interesting to note here the differences in the various accounts of this last conversation. Eden himself in his memoirs does not record his words at the hotel, only underlining the fact that 'there was no discussion of the Spanish problem during our three-power meeting'.<sup>10</sup> James Joll follows word for word the version of Blum himself, given at his trial. Jean Grandmougin, however, offers a version that is radically different. According to him, it was Baldwin and not Eden who asked Blum the question, and what Baldwin is reputed to have said is far from the non-committal nature of Eden's reply, namely: 'That's your business; but in that case, do not count on us.'<sup>11</sup> Cordell Hull follows Grandmougin, in that he also claims that it was Baldwin who spoke to Blum, and he stresses that Baldwin emphasized to Blum 'the British Government's views that any assistance to Spain by France might lead to an international crisis'.<sup>12</sup> Here the notion of British pressure is introduced.

Upon Blum's return to Paris, however, it was not British but French pressure that was immediately brought to bear. He was met at Le Bourget by Chautemps, who informed him that the decision to help the Republicans had become known to the National Assembly, causing considerable alarm: 'As soon as I

<sup>8</sup> Blum at his trial: *Les événements survenus en France 1933-45* (Paris 1947-52), I, part II, 216.

<sup>9</sup> James Joll, *Intellectuals in Politics* (London 1960), 38.

<sup>10</sup> *The Eden Memoirs: Facing the Dictators* (London 1962), 406.

<sup>11</sup> Grandmougin: *Histoire vivante du Front populaire* (Paris 1966), 223.

<sup>12</sup> *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull* (London 1948), 476.

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returned from London, on 24 July, I found myself faced with a deep split in the government, a bitter press campaign, and a kind of parliamentary revolt.<sup>13</sup> Blum hurried to consult Herriot, who advised him in the strongest terms to be prudent: 'I beg you, my dear fellow', he said to me, 'I beg you, don't go and get yourself mixed up in that.'<sup>14</sup>

It is generally admitted that the secret was betrayed by the military attaché of the Spanish Embassy in Paris, whose sympathies lay with Franco, and who had given the information to Henri de Kérillis of *L'Echo de Paris*, who, in the course of a resounding campaign against Blum's action, published the details of the arrangements so far made.

The emotion aroused by the news, not only among the French generally, but more especially in the National Assembly, was so great that Blum believed his only course was to resign. At one moment, in full agreement with President Auriol, he was determined to do so. It appears that he was also prepared to put the question to the Assembly, although this would almost certainly have meant not only his own resignation, but the end of the Popular Front government. He was dissuaded from both courses by the arguments of Ximenes de Asua and Fernados de los Rios, representatives of the Spanish Republican government, who convinced him that the fall of the government 'would be a far more shattering moral blow to the Spanish Popular Front than the practical disadvantages caused by the loss of some material assistance'.<sup>15</sup> Blum thereupon decided to stay, and to attempt to find some way of implementing his original decision while appeasing the violent emotions it had aroused.

On 25 July he called the first cabinet meeting following his return. It revealed the division of opinion among the ministers; there was willingness to help the Spanish Republicans, but reluctance to deliver arms openly to Spain. It was decided to assign the material to Mexico, and to leave it to the discretion of the Mexican Government to put the material to use.<sup>16</sup> The decision was largely influenced by awareness of the British Government's attitude.

<sup>13</sup> *Le Populaire*, 15 October 1945.

<sup>14</sup> *Les événements survenus en France*, 216-7.

<sup>15</sup> Joll, 39.

<sup>16</sup> Again, Cordell Hull gives a different version, namely that when Blum returned to Paris on 25 July, a statement was issued that the French Government had decided against any form of intervention. *The Times* of 26 July carried a

Jeanneney had underlined at the cabinet meeting that French intervention would mean that France would find herself alone: 'We are all convinced here that if there were European complications provoked by any intervention in the Spanish problem, England would not follow us.'<sup>17</sup> Blum himself was aware of this danger, as he revealed in a letter written some years later: 'There can be no doubt that, whatever my authority might have been in London, faced with any European complications resulting from French intervention in Spain, England would have been neutral and more than neutral.'<sup>18</sup>

London, however, had not at that time adopted such an adamant position. Any request from the Spanish Republicans for assistance would have been referred to the Board of Trade and the other departments concerned. The cabinet agreed that they had no powers to stop the sale of commercial aircraft, nor could they act otherwise without recognizing the insurgents. The position taken was one of non-interference rather than non-intervention: 'Possibly the moment might come when, officially or unofficially, the League or this country, in concert with other countries, might have an opportunity to offer good offices. For the moment, however, there was no question of this.'<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting, nonetheless, that Baldwin had apparently already made up his mind. At a private lunch he informed Tom Jones of his instructions to Eden, which were clear: 'On no account, French or other, must he bring us into the fight on the side of the Russians.'<sup>20</sup>

Blum tried to persuade the British to change their policy, and it was at this stage that an incident occurred which, in the words of Blum, 'played a major part in what followed'.<sup>21</sup> Blum received a visit from Philip Noel-Baker, who, on learning that Admiral Darlan was in favour of help for the Republicans, suggested that Darlan should approach Sir Maurice Hankey, who, if supported by the Admiralty, would be able to get an extraordinary meeting of the

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similar story. Lord Avon records that Blum announced on 26 July that France was in no way able to intervene. *The Cordell Hull Memoirs, op. cit.*, 476; *The Eden Memoirs, op. cit.*, 401.

<sup>17</sup> *Les événements survenus en France*, 125.

<sup>18</sup> Blum to Suzanne Blum, 9 July 1942. Quoted in Audry: *Léon Blum ou la politique du juste* (Paris 1955), 125.

<sup>19</sup> Cabinet meeting, 29 July 1936. PRO, Cab. 55 (36) 7. 159-60.

<sup>20</sup> Baldwin, *Diary*. Entry for 27 July 1936.

<sup>21</sup> *Les événements survenus en France*, 217.

cabinet. Darlan was therefore sent to London to confer with the First Sea Lord, Lord Chatfield. As one commentator put it: '[Darlan] was quickly and easily converted to the English point of view'.<sup>22</sup> Returning to France, Darlan informed Blum that, should French intervention lead to war, France could not count on British support.

What exactly took place in London remains a mystery. Admiralty papers have no record of such a meeting. Darlan brought back a written account: 'The handwritten account that Admiral Darlan had drawn up was at my home. It disappeared with all my papers the day after the Germans entered Paris. Is there another copy of this document? I do not know.'<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of what in fact took place, the mission was a total failure, a failure which was to have a marked influence on the decisions taken in Paris. It was in the light of Britain's refusal to support France in the event of a war following intervention – an important distinction between that and any refusal to support intervention itself – that Blum came to realize that a policy of non-intervention was the only possible one for France. In order to present a united stand with London, Blum reversed his original decision and embarked upon the course of non-intervention.

On 31 July the British Ambassador in Paris cabled the Foreign Office that France was likely to propose some form of non-intervention. In the first two days of August approaches were made to both the British and Italian Governments calling for an arrangement for non-intervention in Spain. On 6 August a preliminary text was submitted to all the European Powers, 'laying down definite rules for the application of common undertakings for non-intervention'.<sup>24</sup> The final decision was taken at the cabinet meeting in Paris on 8 August. 'After three weeks of vacillation, on 8 August France decided upon a policy of non-intervention. France took the initiative in this policy.'<sup>25</sup>

It is thus clear that the two days spent in London in July had little direct effect upon the development of French policy towards Spain. It is equally clear that the British attitude in general, especially after Blum's visit, was the determining factor in the

<sup>22</sup> L. E. Dalby, *Léon Blum* (London 1962), 306.

<sup>23</sup> *Les événements survenus en France*, 218.

<sup>24</sup> Eden in House of Commons, 29 October 1936.

<sup>25</sup> Blum in *Le Populaire*, 15 October 1945.

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change of policy. The proposal of a non-intervention pact was the result of a French initiative, it is true, but an initiative that was undertaken not without the very strong influence of Britain, at a time when the French were not strong enough to risk any breach with London. The British Government considered that it was best for the French Government to take this initiative for two reasons: first, because it thought that if the initiative came from London the French Government would be unable to withstand opposition to such a proposal from its own Popular Front; second, because if the initiative came from Paris, from a Socialist Prime Minister, the opposition of the British Labour Party would be effectively silenced.

While therefore there is some truth in Eden's statement in the Commons on 29 October 1936 – 'It is suggested that the French Government took their initiative under strong British pressure. Some even go so far as to say that we threatened the French Government with all sorts of pains and penalties if they did not do this thing. Of course there is not a word of truth in that story. It is pure fabrication' – there can be no doubt that if strong positive pressure was not applied, strong negative pressure, in the intimation of withdrawal of the support upon which the French depended so much, was nonetheless brought to bear. Only Czechoslovakia and Rumania were willing to give France unqualified support for the policy of intervention. Jeanneney's fears proved to be justified; at his trial Blum said: 'We felt almost totally isolated in Europe as far as coming to the assistance of the Spanish Republican Government was concerned.'<sup>26</sup> The historian of the Civil War put it more directly: 'Had it not been for Britain, France and probably the USA would have permitted the Republic to buy arms freely.'<sup>27</sup>

The British attitude made it appear likely that a European war might follow an intervention or at least a serious intensification of the arms race. These considerations outweighed the arguments in favour of intervention – support for another Popular Front government and the desire to prevent the creation of a third hostile government on France's southern frontier. As Blum said in the National Assembly on 5 December 1936: 'Gentlemen, I personally believe that last August Europe was on the verge of war, and I

<sup>26</sup> *Les événements survenus en France*, 218.

<sup>27</sup> H. Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 768.

believe that Europe was saved from war by the French initiative.' This danger was indeed the all-important argument in the discussions concerning the non-intervention pact, an argument repeated time and again, by Eden in the Commons and by Blum in the National Assembly, and notably in the latter's speech at Luna Park on 6 September 1936.<sup>28</sup>

Behind this concern for European peace, however, lay a deeper concern, the peace of France. Blum was deeply aware of the danger of inciting civil war within France by the adoption of the policy of intervention. As he said in a letter to his wife in 1942: 'The situation had only to become more dangerous and more critical and we should have had the rebound of Franco's rebellion. Before any foreign war, France would have had civil war, with precious little chance for a victory for the Republic.'<sup>29</sup> Curiously enough, this was the only argument that Blum failed to advance publicly. He believed that France could play no role in Europe if she were herself engaged in a civil war. The politico-ideological battles that were being fought in secret in France had now found their concrete realization on the battlefields of Spain. The memory of February 1934 was too real, and Blum was not prepared to take any risks, although in fact the danger of a civil war was not perhaps so great as he believed, the 'Leagues' being quiet in the summer of 1936 (the Comité Secret pour l'Action Révolutionnaire was formed only in the winter of 1936). Nonetheless, the obstinacy of the French and British Governments in pursuing the policy of non-intervention, in face of open breaches of the agreement by Germany and Italy, had serious consequences in France, for it only emphasized that lack of the national unity which Blum was striving to maintain.

The situation was further aggravated by the unofficial intervention which took place throughout the war. Blum had said in his Luna Park speech that it was impossible to withdraw from the non-intervention pact and, even worse, to violate it without having the courage to withdraw. In fact, French non-intervention rapidly lapsed into a form of indifference, stirred only by the mutterings of

<sup>28</sup> Blum, *Oeuvres complètes*, IV, 357. On the avoidance of war, cf. Hugh Thomas: 'A general war which broke out over Spain in 1936, 1937 or 1938 would have been fought in circumstances more favourable for the Western democracies than that which came in 1939 over Poland.' *Op. cit.*, 769. But of course the firmness required to denounce the breaches of agreement in the pact was lacking.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Audry, *op. cit.*, 126-7.

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the French right-wing press. It was not so much a question of taking positive steps to prevent intervention as providing the appearance of doing so, as Blum himself recognized many years later: 'We supplied arms without saying so. We practised "relaxed non-intervention", which is another way of saying we organized smuggling almost officially.'<sup>30</sup>

It is not difficult to appreciate his dilemma in August 1936, or to appreciate his courage in reversing his original decision. Eden himself paid tribute to this in the Commons on 29 October 1936: 'No-one can imagine, no-one who knows party politics in France or here can imagine that M Blum's task, or that of his colleagues, was an easy one. Whatever any hon. Member of this House may feel about this agreement, we must surely be in accord that its initiative was an act of courage.' For France this act of courage had unfortunate consequences. The policy of non-intervention split the country even more deeply into two opposing camps, a split which was not healed before the outbreak of war in 1939. The contraband admitted by Blum was indicative of France's abdication and of the disintegration of the Popular Front: 'It is one of the injustices of history that Léon Blum, un homme du bon volonté (sic) par excellence, should have contributed – albeit involuntarily – to the downfall of France.'<sup>31</sup>

While it cannot be denied that the attitude of the British Government had considerable influence upon Blum's decision, it is clear that he failed to appreciate the appeal of a France willing to fight for her ideals. In increasing further the lack of national unity in France, in sapping the national morale by his policy, which in fact reflected the abdication of responsibility towards both Spain and the non-intervention agreement, Blum denied the people of France a real chance of asserting themselves and their nation on the European plane and of giving a lead to the men of ideals. As a journalist, contemporary of Blum, noted: 'Leon Blum is doing reluctantly but loyally what he judges to be best for peace. But history teaches us that it is always dangerous to turn one's back on justice, even with the best of intentions.'<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Blum: *Le Populaire*, 15 October 1945.

<sup>31</sup> J. Wheeler-Bennett, *Munich: prologue to tragedy* (London 1948), 257.

<sup>32</sup> Louis Martin-Chauffier: Editorial in *Vendredi*, 11 September 1936.