

# FRANCISCO FRANCO AS CAUDILLO: Friend or Foe to Spanish Jews ?

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## **The Origins and Rise of Francisco Franco**

During the early morning hours on December 4, 1892, a baby was born in the naval/military town of El Ferrol, in the northern province of Galicia. This baby was baptized Francisco Paulino Hermenegildo y Teodulo Franco y Bahamonde,<sup>1)</sup> better known today as Francisco Franco-Bahamonde. The name “Franco” was the surname of Francisco’s father and Bahamonde was that of his mother. Franco’s Christian name, “Francisco,” was taken from the name of Franco’s grandfather on his father’s side. His first-middle name, “Paulino,” was his uncle’s name. “Hermenegildo” was taken from his aunt (who was also his godmother). For the day he was born, Teodulo was given for one of the saints of the day.<sup>2)</sup>

Franco had a normal childhood, having been the son of a middle-class conservative family. His father, a naval administrator, had strong moral convictions and was very nationalistic. As an adolescent, Franco conducted himself in a formal fashion, and often dressed in a naval uniform.<sup>3)</sup> He was studious and hardworking, while maintaining a revered respect toward his parents, always being obedient and conscientious.

Although there was little that was unusual about the early years of his childhood, an event occurred when Franco was six that was to directly affect the course of his life and influence his future beliefs: Spain was crushingly defeated in the Spanish-American War. Primarily a naval disaster, Spain’s defeat strongly affected Franco’s family. As a naval officer, Franco’s father was, of course, crushed by Spain’s losses. By the time Franco was of age to consider a choice of career, he had already been imbued with strong nationalistic feelings.<sup>4)</sup>

It has been said that Franco never was able to accept Spain’s defeat in the Spanish-American War. This made an indelible impression on him which was to last throughout his adult life. Franco frequently referred to the “impotent democratic regime” and the “jealous foreign powers” that led Spain into political darkness after the 1898 conflict.<sup>5)</sup>

Because Franco was constantly surrounded by the attitudes of his naval father, it would seem logical that he would have followed in his father’s footsteps regarding his career. This did not happen. Because of Spain’s embarrassing defeat in the Spanish American War, the navy was in shambles. Franco’s father and mother were old fashioned and practical. Because of the widespread poverty and unemployment that was plaguing their town of El Ferrol, the elder Francos soon realized that

Francisco's chances of pursuing a promising career in the naval profession were bleak. Even though Franco's forebearers had been closely involved with the navy for generations, it was painfully apparent to the fifteen year old Franco and his parents that an alternate profession was necessary. Only two careers were considered to be "proper" to this middle-class family — the military or law. At that time, the law profession was considered to be a tool for liberal ideology; so Franco was to join the Spanish Army.<sup>6)</sup>

On June 26, 1907, Francisco Franco, at the age of fifteen, took the entrance exams to enter the Infantry Academy in Toledo.<sup>7)</sup> Thus began his colorful military career in the Spanish Army. In two short years, Franco was promoted to the rank of Second Lieutenant, and he volunteered to serve in the conflict with Morocco.<sup>8)</sup> Franco's parental influence and Spain's defeat in the Spanish-American War shaped his conservative attitudes. His political philosophy, already firmly rooted, helped to establish his position of Major only six years later.<sup>9)</sup>

Franco arrived in Morocco to preserve Spain's holdings that were acquired in 1497, when the territories were conquered in the name of the Catholic Monarchs — Ferdinand and Isabel.<sup>10)</sup> Franco had strong convictions regarding Spain's role in the world and he regarded Britain's support of Moroccan forces as an act against Spain. The ill-feelings that were inspired during the African conflict could help to explain Franco's support of the Axis during World War II. Though Spain was officially neutral during World War I, Franco had come to see Britain as the villain in that conflict.<sup>11)</sup>

"Extreme disgust" can accurately reflect Franco's attitude toward the Socialists in the Spanish government and congress at the time, who were constantly voicing disapproval of Spain's involvement in Africa. While Franco was serving his country in Morocco, the Socialists were gaining strength back in Spain. It was during Franco's second tour of duty in Morocco (then promoted to Major), that he issued his first memorandum regarding the plight of Spanish nationals outside of Spain, which included Sephardim:

During the period 1923-24, when the war had already lasted twelve years and was going particularly badly for Spain, Franco sent several memoranda to his Commander-in-Chief, General Primo de Rivera,<sup>12)</sup> urging him to continue the fight for Spanish rule in Morocco. As part of his efforts to persuade his superior of the need to maintain a presence in the area, Franco argued that it was Spain's duty not to abandon the "many thousands of Spaniards who had lived in Morocco for centuries." . . . Also, in his dispatches from the war zone, Franco included moving accounts of the plight of the Jews and of Moroccans loyal to Spain, who were forced to evacuate their homes during the fighting. In one instance when the Spaniards were forced to retreat from the town of Xauen, Franco had lorries prepared for the civilian population, including many Jews. He and the Legion formed the rear guard of the fleeing convoy. Franco's reports concerning Morocco's unprotected Sephardim may have finally convinced Primo de Rivera to effect the enactment of the 1924 edict.<sup>13)</sup>

The year 1924 not only marked the passing of the landmark legislation known as the Primo de Rivera Law, but also marked the year Franco become the commander of the Foreign Legion in Morocco, at the young age of twenty-nine. Franco forged and implemented a plan that eventually led to the Moroccan forces' defeat by 1927.<sup>14)</sup> At the age of thirty-three, Francisco became General Franco.

Unfortunately, the confidence that Franco had in Miguel Primo de Rivera was not the general consensus throughout Spain. Growing unpopularity and his support of poor legislation finally forced Primo de Rivera to resign from office. The result was tumultuous for Spain. The governments that followed were unstable and radical.

The national election of 1931 resulted in a victory for the Republicans, who were generally atheistic and leftist in principle, and the termination of the monarchy. A trickle of East European Jews entered Spain, with the understanding that the new government welcomed their resettlement.<sup>15)</sup>

Jews were allowed to enter Spain because historically speaking, they were not a threat to the new Spanish Republic; they were not connected with any foreign power, nor were they active in seeking converts to Judaism; they offered no political threat and the Spanish Republic seemed encouraging to Jews who were being persecuted in the East.

Meanwhile, the Spanish Republic was putting its stamp of approval on many actions that Franco regarded as contributing to Spain's ongoing downfall. The outbreak of riots and the burning of religious buildings saddened Franco. Spain was weakened militarily through legislation passed by the Republicans; also anti-religious legislation was promulgated. Because of his rank in the military, Franco was constantly urged to lead a revolt. Franco was apprehensive about such a measure, because he knew a revolt would most inevitably lead to national disunity. But due to ensuing riots, assassinations, torchings, and the threat of Marxist influence in the military, Franco felt that the time had come and "drastic" measures were unavoidable. In 1936, he acted with the help of Germany and Italy, in leading a rebellion which was to spark the Spanish Civil War.

### **Spanish Civil War**

During the years 1936-1939, Spain witnessed one of the most gruesome, demoralizing wars ever fought in the history of the world.<sup>16)</sup> The Spanish Civil War takes a particularly poignant position in history because it was more than Spaniard versus Spaniard; it was father versus son, and brother versus brother. The Civil War destroyed families, separated communities and ravaged a country for three long years.

Franco's army came from the south, just as the Moors had done centuries before, and rapidly he went through the vast plains of the south toward Castile. He encountered strong resistance in

Andalucia but eventually Franco conquered the key cities. Franco's invading forces moved steadily and promptly to Madrid, the Republican capital of the ruling government. Here, Franco encountered the principal opposition of the Republican army, and was almost stopped. The decision to continue to try to conquer Madrid was made, and for the next three years the two armies fought face to face in the countryside around Madrid, where the University of Madrid is today. All of the university's buildings were destroyed and some of the bombs penetrated the walls of the Royal Palace, which is located within the city limits of Madrid.

The Loyalists were considered to be the most radical faction and were loyal to the Republic; they killed priests, nuns, and anyone else who was thought to be pro-Franco. The Nationalists, like Franco, also terrorized the Spanish people by rounding up those who were believed to support the Republic in each conquered region and put them before firing squads. Over 200,000 Spaniards were killed in this manner, "away from the battlefield"<sup>17)</sup>.

The takeover by Franco was initiated for ideological reasons. Franco believed the Republic to be weak and too liberal. He was against the attacks on religious institutions and clergy; against strikes and the power of labor unions; against any type of democratic or parliamentary model of government; and against civil and religious liberty. The character of Franco's eventual dictatorship was molded by negative aspects of the Republican government (i.e. ideology and practices).

Franco maintained that his fight against the Republic was also a fight against communism (most likely for propaganda reasons<sup>18)</sup>); initially, however, Franco did not mention this in his original manifest. This pledge to combat communism interested Italy and Germany, who immediately directed planes to aid Franco in transporting soldiers and supplies. Later, both Mussolini and Hitler sent troops to fight alongside the Spaniards in the civil conflict. Italy sent four divisions to fight in Spain, while Germany provided an airforce and thousands of soldiers for use in the conflict.

The Spanish conflict was on an international scale. Italy and Germany helped Franco win the Spanish Civil War through their continual assistance. The western democracies and the Soviet Union maintained a more neutral position, helping the Republic only sparingly. Although the Republic followed an ideology more closely aligned with those of the United States, England, and France, these nations feared that active participation on the side of the Republic would jeopardize economic interests maintained in Germany and Italy (which could possibly cause problems in diplomatic relations with the Germans and Italians). Although a no intervention and neutrality policy was followed with regard to the Spanish Civil War, it can be said that the war was actually a preamble to the Second World War, thus internationalizing the Spanish conflict.

The Republic had terribly outdated equipment, insufficient supplies and inadequately trained soldiers. There were soldiers fighting who did not even know the meaning of the word "fascist"; they were young and badly trained. Russia sent a few military specialists to help in propaganda and provided some planes (France sold planes to the Republican Government but these proved to be quite

insufficient in comparison to the Italian and German hardware used by Franco and the Nationalists). The Russian general's advice to the Republicans was at times inadequate and proved to be quite costly to the Republican side after several defeats in battle.<sup>19)</sup>

If the Allied countries had taken a more active role in the Spanish Civil War, they would have been able to take advantage of the rare opportunity facing Italy and Germany. Since the Spanish Civil War was an international war in many aspects, Italy and Germany used Spain as a battleground to test their new arms and propaganda techniques.

On April 1, 1939, General Franco was declared sole ruler and Caudillo of Spain. Madrid had fallen and the Republic was destroyed. The Spanish Civil War had had a devastating effect on the morale of the people and on the economy.

In the immediately postwar years the problem was one of sheer physical survival of feeding and finding jobs for a nation whose economy had been run down by its own Civil War and which was isolated from the economies of the West, . . . the Civil War had provoked an unprecedented economic recession.<sup>20)</sup>

The Jews of Spain suddenly found themselves in a very precarious position concerning the politics, economics, and social attitudes of the day. Previously, Jews had come to Spain to partake of the widespread freedoms allowed by the Republican government. Under Franco, a conservative and seemingly intolerant attitude against the Jews appeared. Accordingly, the Jews reacted to this attitude and to the Civil War.

### **Jewish Response to Franco**

In 1934, approximately 4,000 Jews lived in Spain.<sup>21)</sup> The majority of these Jews had taken advantage of the Primo de Rivera Law, which allowed them not only to claim Spanish citizenship, but also to move their place of domicile to Spain.<sup>22)</sup>

Large numbers of Jews encouraged by the separation of church and state and the atmosphere of religious freedom, were attracted to Republican Spain. Desperate Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany found a ready sanctuary in Spain. Despite these encouraging signs, there remained a strong undercurrent of popular anti-semitism and hatred of Jews. One indicator of Spanish anti-semitism is the fact that the notorious forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, enjoyed four different Spanish editions not to mention reprintings, between 1930 and 1935. The point should not be lost that there must have been a sizable demand for this anti-semitic classic.<sup>23)</sup>

Thus, Spain was somewhat of a disappointment for many of the Jews who came to the country. After Franco's troops invaded Spain from Morocco, there was a surge of loyalty and support from Jews in

the United States toward the Spanish Republican Government under siege. This was a predictable reaction, at a time when Hitler was gaining more and more power, forcing Jews to flee Germany (while the British were restricting immigration into Palestine). It would not seem likely that the Spanish conflict would have a great impact on American Jews who were thousands of miles away. This, however, was not the case at all:

Reactions to the war were not slow in coming. From the very outset, the Jewish press without exception described Franco's forces as "Fascists." The repeated use of this emotionally charged term at once ended any possibility of debate among Jews as to which side to support in the Civil War. Jews automatically opposed Franco because Hitler and Mussolini were Fascists. There was simply no choice but to support the Loyalists, the legitimate Spanish government. To have done otherwise would have been an impossibility for any Jew in light of the Jewish persecution in Germany and the German military aid extended to Franco.<sup>24)</sup>

Further demonstrating the sincerity of American Jews in voicing an opinion about Franco and his policies, an American, Roger A. Brame, wrote a scathing letter to the editor entitled, "Fate of Jewry Hinges on Turn of Spanish Revolution," printed in *Emanu-El and the Jewish Journal*. His letter is as follows:

Although all of Europe is intently observing the internecine strife in the throes of which Spain is now writhing, the Jews the world over cannot over-estimate the anti-semitic ramifications that are involved. Your editorial, entitled "Spain Teaches a Lesson", published last week, indicates the seriousness of the situation, and particularly the pernicious character of Fascism to Jewish existence.

In 1492, Spain led the world in a most malicious course of antisemitic persecution, known as the bloody Inquisition, in which extreme cruelties were perpetrated against the Sephardic Jews. Spain paid dearly for her action, descending from a first-rate nation to a third-rate power. Now, four hundred and fifty years later, with Germany leading the way, Spain seems to be welcoming a new opportunity to follow suit by physically imprisoning and commercially ruining the Jewish residents.

We Jews in America who are interested have our hands tied. We certainly cannot participate in the Spanish revolution, officially or unofficially. But, in the event that the Spanish revolution should be successful, we can anticipate a crisis unparalleled in the history of the world. Not only will the Nazi persecutors [sic] undoubtedly redouble the persecutions whose toll at this time is beyond comprehension, but the repercussion will even be felt in France in the probable yielding of the Blum Ministry, which, in substance, will mean *the final breaking of the last dam holding in partial check European persecution of the Jews.* [italics added]

Nazism and Fascism recognize no territorial boundaries, but are germs inculcating the entire world and we Jews in America must gird our loins and prepare.<sup>25)</sup>

A common attitude toward Hitler and Nazism was apparent through sympathetic feelings toward the abhorrent conditions facing German Jewry. This prompted American Jews to become involved in printing and verbalizing the evils facing their Spanish brothers if the Nationalists and Franco were allowed to gain control. At one point in the Spanish Civil War, an American group of volunteers decided to fight alongside the Loyalists to battle Fascism. A large number of Jews took an active part in fighting the Nationalists. Their motivation stemmed from a vehement hatred toward Hitler and his anti-semitism.<sup>26)</sup> Of the non-Jews who took part in the conflict, many in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade were motivated for less emotional reasons; they viewed Fascism as a cancer that was spreading, and feared the political ideology of Hitler and Mussolini might eventually infiltrate all of Europe and possibly even the United States.<sup>27)</sup>

For political as well as religious reasons, the Jewish reaction was more visible than one might suspect in the United States and around the world. The persecution of European Jews was perceived by world Jewry as a serious threat to the international Jewish community, and justly so. The assumption that Franco would support the anti-semitic policies of Nazi Germany, was rooted in Franco's outward support and alliance with Hitler.

The Nationalist victory in the Spanish Civil War sent a shock-wave through the already sensitive Jewish community. The eyes of the world, however, had already begun to focus upon the ensuing threat of a Second World War. A war-like atmosphere was engulfing Europe as Hitler began his expansionist program, threatening the entire European continent, and the Jewish people who lived there.

Franco's overall treatment of Sephardic Jewry is somewhat of an enigma. At times, he was benevolent, generously offering refuge to scores of Jewish people by invoking the Primo de Rivera Law of 1924 to secure their safety from Hitler's death camps. Other times, he closed Spain's borders forcing many Jews to return to probable and even certain death in some documented cases.

Although Franco can not be widely regarded as a true altruist toward Spanish Jews, he did offer a friendly hand more consistently in the final stages of World War II (which is more than the Allied forces did). His official policies were contradictory, causing great stress and hardship to a sizable number of European Jews of Spanish descent — which suggests that he was more of a foe than a friend. The question posed in the title of this paper may never be clearly answered until a future treasure trove of previously unknown or declassified documents surfaces and reveals Francisco Franco's true intentions concerning his government's treatment of Jews before, during and after World War II.

#### NOTES

- 1) Ricardo de la Cierva. *Franco* (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1986), p. 19. Historically, the surname "Franco" was

of Jewish origin, just as many Spanish names in Spain and Latin America were; however, because of the forced conversion of many Jews during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, some of these families took their new Roman Catholic faith very seriously, thus becoming very staunch Catholics. If this were the case for the Franco family, which is impossible to know with absolute certainty, the Francos for many generations were practicing Catholics, and he personally was very sincere about his Catholicism.

- 2) Ibid.
- 3) Ibid., p. 26.
- 4) Lipschitz, *Franco, Spain, the Jews, and the Holocaust*, p. 12.
- 5) Ibid. Citing Jaime de Andrade (a Franco pseudonym), script of the film *Raza* ("The Race"), Madrid, 1942.
- 6) Ibid., p. 13.
- 7) Cierva, *Franco*, p. 31.
- 8) This conflict was initiated by the desire for Spain to expand her territorial possessions after faring so miserably in the Spanish-American War. Clearly, Morocco was not about to give up any more territory and was even interested in regaining territory that was under Spanish control.
- 9) Lipschitz, *Franco, Spain, the Jews, and the Holocaust*, p. 13.
- 10) Cierva, *Franco*, p. 38.
- 11) It is important to make this point when determining possible motives Franco may have had with regard to his support of the Axis during World War II. Franco viewed Britain as anti-Spain because of her support to the Moroccan forces. During World War I, Franco believed Britain to be the antagonist in that conflict, thus Franco developed strong anti-foreign feelings toward Britain and even the United States (because of the Spanish-American War in 1898). (Lipschitz, *Franco, Spain, the Jews, and the Holocaust*, p. 13).
- 12) Miguel Primo de Rivera had taken over the Spanish government in 1920 after Franco had spent three years in Spain, and had returned to Morocco. Franco had a high sense of admiration for Primo de Rivera, because Franco believed Spain was more powerful and stable under the role of a dictator. This idea is believed to be why Franco felt so strongly about having a dictatorship in Spain during his long rule.
- 13) It can only be speculated that Franco's reports may have encouraged Primo de Rivera to push for the 1924 edict. Dr. Pulido made concerned efforts to pass this legislation also. (Lipschitz, *Franco, Spain, the Jews, and the Holocaust*, p. 10. Citing in part from George Hills, *Franco: The Man and His Nation* (New York, Macmillan, 1967) pp. 81-141, 408).
- 14) Ibid., p. 13.
- 15) Ibid., p. 14, citing Mark Wischnitzer, HIAS-JCA Emigration Association, *Visas to Freedom: Exodus from Germany* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1956), pp. 157-58.
- 16) For a complete explanation of the moral and material destruction incurred during and after the war, see George Hills, *Spain* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970) pp. 229-238.
- 17) J. W. D. Trythall, *El Caudillo: A Political Biography of Franco* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970), pp. 135-136.
- 18) Carr, *Modern Spain: 1875-1980*, p. 153.
- 19) Hills, *Spain*, p. 220.
- 20) Carr, *Modern Spain: 1875-1980*, p. 155.
- 21) Robert Singerman, "American-Jewish Reactions to the Spanish Civil War" *Journal of Church and State*, V. 19 (1977), p. 262.
- 22) Few Jews actually took full advantage of the Primo de Rivera Law in the year 1924; however, from 1933 until the Spanish Civil War, Jewish refugees considered the edict a viable manner in which to escape anti-semitic persecution in Eastern Europe, thus making Spain somewhat of a haven for Sephardic Jews. These Jews entered Spain because of the edict of 1924, which officially expired in 1930. Nonetheless, they were able to use the Primo de Rivera Law to claim Spanish citizenship in order to flee Nazi persecution.
- 23) Singerman, "American-Jewish Reactions to the Spanish Civil War," pp. 262-263.



- 24) Ibid., p. 264.
- 25) Ibid., pp. 264-265.
- 26) See Cecil Ely's *Between the Bullet and the Lie: American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War* (New York: 1969) and Arthur Landis' *The Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1967) for accurate accounts of the attitudes within the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.
- 27) It is interesting to note that while Franco was in Morocco preparing for the invasion of Spain, he received financial support from Jewish merchants in North Africa. There was a much different attitude toward Franco by the North African Jews, as compared to their American brethren. They viewed Franco as a positive, rather than evil force with regard to the Jewish cause. (Sam Toledano, personal interview, Madrid, Spain, Summer 1986.)

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