Sovereignty in the shadow of royalty: Spain's threats and Gibraltar's 1954 royal welcome

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the high-stakes security and diplomatic tensions surrounding Queen Elizabeth II's 1954 visit to Gibraltar. Despite intense opposition from General Franco, including diplomatic protests and orchestrated civil unrest, Britain refused to cancel the visit. Drawing on primary sources, the study analyses threats ranging from Falangist sabotage plots to rumored Communist conspiracies and Soviet maritime presence. It argues that the visit served as a pivotal assertion of British sovereignty. Ultimately, while the visit transpired without incident due to rigorous colonial and MI5 intelligence efforts, it triggered a long-term escalation of Spanish frontier restrictions and diplomatic frost.

Keywords: Gibraltar 1954, Queen Elizabeth II, Franco, Anglo-Spanish Relations, Defense Security Officer, MI5, Cold War Diplomacy, Sovereignty.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina las tensiones diplomáticas y de seguridad de alto riesgo que rodearon la visita de la reina Isabel II a Gibraltar en 1954. A pesar de la intensa oposición del general Franco, que incluyó protestas diplomáticas y disturbios civiles orquestados, Gran Bretaña se negó a cancelar la visita. Basándose en fuentes primarias, el estudio analiza amenazas que van desde complots de sabotaje falangistas hasta supuestas conspiraciones comunistas y la presencia marítima soviética. Sostiene que la visita sirvió como una afirmación crucial de la soberanía británica. En última instancia, aunque la visita transcurrió sin incidentes gracias a los rigurosos esfuerzos de los servicios coloniales y de inteligencia del MI5, desencadenó una escalada a largo plazo de las restricciones fronterizas españolas y un congelamiento de las relaciones diplomáticas.

Palabras clave: Gibraltar 1954, Reina Isabel II, Franco, Relaciones anglo-españolas, Oficial de Seguridad de Defensa, MI5, Diplomacia de la Guerra Fría, Soberanía.

1. Introduction

On 6 February 1952, Princess Elizabeth became Queen of the United Kingdom and Head of the Commonwealth (QE2) after her father King George VI died unexpectedly at the age of 52. Five months after her coronation, QE2 embarked on the longest ever tour of the Commonwealth nations. After visiting Malta from 3rd to the 7th of May 1954, QE2 wrapped up her marathon Commonwealth tour, arriving in Gibraltar with her family on the newly inaugurated Royal Yacht Britannia on 10 May 1954.

Immediately after the Royal visit to Gibraltar was announced on 23, June 1953, (Gibraltar Chronicle, 1953) the Spanish Ambassador in London, Miguel Primo de Rivera y Sáenz de Heredia, (Argaya Rocca, 2022) made robust representations on behalf of General Franco, Spanish Head of State, regarding the abrupt and ungracious way the British Government had made the announcement. Primo de Rivera demanded the annulment of the Queen's Gibraltar visit.



Figure 1: Map of Queen Elizabeth II Tour of the Commonwealth 1953-1954

Britain refuted the Spanish allegations. The Royal visit to Gibraltar had not been planned and announced in an abrupt and ungracious manner. King Edward VII in 1903 and King George V in 1912 visited Gibraltar without reaction from Spain. Similarly, the visit by King George VI in 1943, caused no retort from Spain.

Britain stated that it was a certainty Her Majesty would visit Gibraltar. Gibraltarians would think it strange if their new Queen sailed past the Straits without paying a visit.

The Spanish Consul in Gibraltar was recalled to Madrid and his consular office closed indefinitely on 1, May 1954, 237 years after it's opening. (Romero Bartumeus, L, 2011:17). After the Queen's visit, Franco tightened existing restrictions. (Dennis, P, 2011:55)

2. Security

On 23 February 1954, General Sir Gordon MacMillan,Governor of Gibraltar, made a live radio broadcast regarding the forthcoming Queen's visit. MacMillan's speech was transmitted by Radio Gibraltar on the Medium Wave and Radio Diffusion bands. The following day, Oliver Lyttelton, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, sent MacMillan a telegram stating,



SOUVENIR SUPPLEMENT

Gibraltar Chronicle

SATURDAY, MAY 8, 1954.

Visit to the Rock of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

10 & 11 MAY, 1954

TWENTIETH CENTURY QUEEN

The symbol of the age

BY MARGARET McCARTNEY

THE REIGN of Queen Elizabeth II, like every new reign, began on a note of mourning for a Sovereign. But the nation that had loved its King loved also now its Queen. As the Queen with the nation, and indeed the world, paid a last tribute to the King who had also been a dearly beloved father, the end of an era was at hand, and the New Elizabethan Age was already born.

England has reached her greatest heights under her Queens. The "spacious times" of the First Elizabeth, the valiant years of Queen Anne, the Empire-building era of the Great Victoria, were all evidence that Queens could fire the greatest depths of the nation.

Now, the young Queen with the solemn blue eyes and the burnished hair had "prayed God" to help her "to discharge worthily this heavy task" that had been laid upon her "so early" in her life. Many felt that a young monarch could mean the renewed youth of the nation.

It was perhaps fitting that the young Queen, who is, after all, the symbol of her subjects, should make her first public appearance at the dedication of Bloody Mount. The ceremony dates from the ancient time when the Sovereign was called upon to wash the feet of beggars. So it remains a permanent reminder that the monarch is always the servant of the people.

Youthful gaiety

With the ending of official mourning, the Royal Year seemed to emerge gradually into a new life.

At the Trooping of the Colour on the Sovereign's official birthday, the Queen, in earlier years, had ridden on this brilliant occasion down the Mall at the head of the Household Cavalry. This year, in her feminine version of a grandmother's dress, the young Queen, erect and serene on her spirited horse, was the perfect symbol of a new Age.

Later came all the glory of Royal Ascot, when the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh brought a fresh

Outward symbol

Gradually, the Queen's mourning changed from sombre black to mauve and white, and with each outward symbol of the change she added something of the sense of the young Queen's reign.

Then came the ordeal with the traditional Christmas broadcast, sometimes more poignant because the human voice of a sovereign is heard more intimately than the ballroom of the First Elizabeth. She had already, in less than a year, set the pattern of her reign.

So, when the Queen returned from her short Christmas holiday at Sandringham she turned her face confidently towards the tremendous ordeal of her Coronation.

This is the concluding article of the series "Twentieth Century Queen" giving the life-story of Her Majesty. It describes the period since the death of King George VI and how Her Majesty has become "the symbol of the age in which she lives and rules."

When on June 2 the Queen, in the ancient glory of Westminster Abbey, received her crown in the sight of the wealthiest crown in the world, she was making a covenant between herself and the peoples of her Commonwealth, a solemn pledge from which death alone could release her.

At the moment of her crowning, in the midst of a great ceremonial, watched by the world, this young wife and mother must have felt the uncompromising loneliness of her exalted task.

The Queen has always been determined that she shall be more than a mere figurehead. She is vitally interested in the affairs of her nation, and her Ministers have often been surprised by her far-reaching knowledge of detail. It is to her credit that she has managed to devote her life to her task, to the affairs of state, and, because of the exactions of monarchy, which she learned in the schoolroom as other children learn their multiplication tables.

So, when that time comes when over the world shall come to know their Queen. Already she has made several state tours within the British Isles since her coronation, and with her Tour of Australia she has set in motion her plan to visit the Empire at frequently intervals.

For Elizabeth II, as her great ancestor to whom her reign has already been likened, is possessed of a strong will and has her own ideas.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE EIGHT)

A new Royal Command portrait by Baron. It was taken on the small staircase in the Grand Entrance at the Palace shortly before Her Majesty the Queen left Britain for her Royal Tour of the Commonwealth.

The Queen is wearing a yellow tulle evening gown, decorated with sprays of mimosa and gold paillette embroidery. Her Majesty is wearing the Blue Ribbon and Star of the Most Noble Order of the Garter.

The diamond necklace was a wedding present from His Highness the Nizam of Hyderabad; the stars, also a wedding present, was given to Her Majesty by the late Queen Mary.

The bow brooch, drop earrings, bracelet and platinum wrist watch are also set in diamonds.

Figure 2: Gibraltar Chronicle Souvenir Supplement 8 May 1954



Figure 3: General Sir Gordon MacMillan—Governor of Gibraltar—1952-1955

"The Prime Minister and I are disturbed by your recent speech." (The National Archives, hereafter TNA, 1954)

Lyttelton said that the Royal Tour arrangements were a matter for the Palace and the Cabinet. Pronouncements were only allowed after Cabinet approval. MacMillan was instructed to travel to London to see Churchill, who insisted every step be taken to prevent any linking to MacMillan's speech.

Reassurance came from Sir John Balfour, British Ambassador in Madrid, who thought MacMillan's broadcast had a positive effect. Balfour said the broadcast was made to lessen tensions caused by the recent Madrid press outcry. Furthermore, the broadcast had set at rest doubts held where people who worked in Gibraltar, but lived outside, would be allowed to cross the frontier during the Queen's visit. The Foreign and Colonial Offices disagreed, regarding MacMillan's broadcast counter-productive, basing their argument thus:

1. The Queen's programme for Gibraltar did not require publication.

2. The announcement that the frontier would be kept open during the visit was premature.

3. The Queen's visit might have to be cancelled if the situation in Spain were to deteriorate sharply.

4. Saying, no need for bullet-proof vehicles for the Royal Party is an invitation to the more disrespectable Falangists.

5. Spain will never believe the broadcast was made without Her Majesty's Government permission. We will be considered liars.

Following the broadcast, press publicity in Britain was widespread. Headlines such as the Daily Sketch's 'Franco gets slapped' inevitably reach Madrid, prompting the Spanish Press to respond with a volley of counterattack articles and an intensification of measures designed to interfere with the Queen's visit.

Extreme care was taken to make the arrangements as secure as possible. Two senior officers from Scotland Yard, together with the Inspector General of Colonial Police, flew to Gibraltar to examine the arrangements in situ. Whilst intelligence about Spanish intentions and movements of undesirables was being procured through diplomatic and secret channels.

Early in April, the Spanish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (SMFA) contacted Balfour, saying information had been received regarding a Communist plot to attack the Queen during her visit (TNA, 1954). Who were these Communists? Were they based in Spain? If not, where did they come from? The intelligence was sketchy and unconfirmed.

In the absence of information, British policy followed strict guidelines, assuming veracity until vacuity was confirmed. All security arrangements, a collaboration between Scotland Yard, MI5, and the Defense Security Office (DSO), had been under intense scrutiny since early1953.

Frontier-wise, the proposal was to keep it open, only allowing in holders of special day, and ordinary entry passes. Dock workers were given time off whilst ensuring minimum services were maintained.

Three weeks before the Royals were due in Gibraltar, Lyttelton received information regarding plans of a flotilla of Soviet ships,

to be in Gibraltar during the Queen's visit. The FO was instructed to inform the Soviet Ambassador that,

"All available berths at Gibraltar will be taken up from the 8th to 12th May 1954. And that it will be impossible to afford Soviets any facilities there." (TNA,1954)

However, the Soviets might claim rights to anchor at Gibraltar. London was adamant that this would remain unrealized during the Queen's stay, and authorized MacMillan to use his powers to prevent ships entering the port. The Soviets took this in good part, giving assurances that all their vessels would leave Gibraltar by May 8 as agreed. Churchill, however, said the Soviet ships would not constitute a danger, to exclude them, might arise unnecessary animosity. The Soviets obliged, departing Gibraltar on the date stipulated.

3. Sabotage

The DSO in Gibraltar (a key MI5 outpost focused on counter-espionage) under Captain David Scherr, obtained alarming information, reference a Spanish Intelligence plan of sabotage in Gibraltar between 8 and 11 May, 1954. (TNA, 1954). DSO explained the intention was an explosion in a tunnel under construction, adjacent to an oil depot, without causing casualties, particularly to the Royals. This news gave reason for grave concern. Reassuringly, DSO reported the suspects had been identified and deported (TNA, 1954). Notwithstanding DSO's reassurances, on May 3, 1954, Lyttelton advised MacMillan that, given any reason for concern, immediate changes to the programme were to be made to mitigate all risks. The perceived gravity of the situation raised questions canceling the visit altogether was one of them.



Figure 4: A flotilla of Soviet ships in Gibraltar before the Queen's visit – May 1954

On May 4, MacMillan gave specific details of the local security arrangements:

1. Suspects had been excluded.
2. Areas concerned covered by patrols began six months ago.
3. Admiralty Tunnel works terminated.
4. Arrangements to secure access to explosives
5. Removal of inflammables
6. Termination of the delay appliance primer detonator
7. All areas constantly and thoroughly searched.

Reliable sources indicated the sabotage plan would use the last shift of workers inside the tunnel to cause explosions 24 or 36 hours later.

On 7 May, Churchill reminded MacMillan that,

"No precaution must be neglected." (TNA, 1954)

MacMillan was instructed to report any further rumors, and to keep an open mind until the last moment regarding a change of arrangements. Last-minute changes, according to Churchill, could create valuable security enhancements. Churchill emphasized that any change in the perceived risk should be reported personally to him without delay.

Things were moving fast. That same day, DSO learned the sabotage organizers had abandoned the plot—physically, due to the tunnel works termination, and because DSO knew of their plan. Intelligence pointed to a *Comandante* Molina who had said, 'everything is finished' when he heard news of the termination of the tunnel works. Madrid was informed that Molina's intentions had come to British ears.

Why did Britain divulge their knowledge of Molina's intentions? Presumably, the objective was to deter other plots that might have been brewing. Subsequently, General Cuesta was informed that no further facilities to enter Gibraltar would be given to Molina.

4. Risks and precautions

The graveness of the thwarted sabotage increased the perceived risks towards the Royal Party. The diligence of MI5 working in unison with the DSO under Captain David Scherr in Gibraltar, had foiled Molina's plan. However, further, arguable reports had been received regarding an unspecified act at the wharf where Britannia berthed. An individual, well known to DSO, had been assigned the task. It later emerged that this person had worked for the DSO both during and since the war. However, doubts regarding the reliability of this once dependable informant had emerged. Consequently, he was brought in and interrogated by DSO, who reported the individual had left Gibraltar after the interrogation, and not returned (TNA, 1954).

In Gibraltar and the Campo Area, since the end of 1953, a special security operation had been conducted to prevent infiltrations of Spanish troublemakers. Reliable information was obtained regarding a Falange Española militia known as *Guardia de Franco* had been responsible for an anonymous letter threatening the Queen's life which appeared in the London Press in early March (Foreign Office hereafter FO, 1954). The Falange denied this saying the letter was signed *Falange Española* not the party's official designation *Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las*



Figure 5: José Antonio Primo de Rivera, founder of Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las Jons

Jons. Britain dismissed this as captious sophistry. Prior to its compulsory fusion, in 1937, with collaborating Traditionalists, the party was known as *Falange Española*. The original party's old guard regarded themselves as *Falange Autentica,* backbone of the national movement.

Guardia de Franco had been prominent in the logistics and funding of the demonstrations against the Royal visit, some of which ended in rioting and criminal damage to British property (TNA, 1954). Anti-British rallies marched in five major Spanish cities, with thousands of frenetic demonstrators damaging British property, chanting,

"Franco, Franco, we want Gibraltar" (Gibraltar Chronicle, 1954)

A report from the London press, re-published by the Gibraltar Chronicle, stated that the Spanish authorities had tacitly approved the mass protest. However, *El Español* newspaper (the weekly organ of the Director-General of the Spanish Press) published an open letter exhorting the students to accept the peculiar outcome of the protests, declaring that British agents were to blame for the excesses that marked them.

The feeling in Spain regarding the demonstrations was that the Falangist actions had been ill-judged, succeeding only, in hardening the British attitude towards the visit. Franco forgot the part he played initially, instigating the protests, and instead reprimanded all ministers concerned. Was Franco's showing regret towards his own initiative?

What would Franco do next? The testimony of an informant who was privileged to attend weekly lunch with Franco's most intimate cronies stated that in contrast to the almost pathological invective about the Queen's visit indulged in by his tablemates on previous occasions, at present, since the demonstrations fiasco, not a single word had been uttered on the subject. The Spanish Press, however, reaffirmed their negativity towards the Queen's visit. A crazy headline appeared in one of the Falangist newspapers:

"Queen's programme dislocated. She may have to abandon the final part of her tour because she is expecting a child. (TNA, 1954)

State-sponsored disinformation is not new!

The number of serious threats identified put DSO and MI5 on high alert. A relationship was established with a certain Colonel Zea from the Spanish Security Service. Zea had received information regarding the repatriation of 248 former members of the *Division Azul*. These men had spent 11 years in Soviet Russia, and the worry was they might have been trained and indoctrinated by the Soviets to conduct espionage tasks on their return to Spain (FO, 1954)

Zea warned that it was conceivable that some of these men intended to take some action at the time of the Queen's visit. To this end, he furnished MI5 a list of relevant names and pledged no repatriate would be able to leave Spain before or during the Queen's visit. Copies of the list were sent to Gibraltar and Tangier. Zea invited the British authorities to submit questionnaires based on intelligence requirements. The strategy, Zea confided, was to interrogate the repatriates and then share the information with the British, as it came to his attention.

Information was indeed received, not from Zea, from Señor De las Barcenas, the Director General of Foreign Policy at the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Barcenas had received information regarding a conspiracy to take advantage of the Queen's visit to Gibraltar and make her the subject of aggression.

According to Barcenas, the task was assigned to a Communist group of which Francisco Peña Marin, a 'Red' air force officer, trained in the USSR, and Perez Dueño, also a former 'Red' officer were members. In 1945, Peña Marin had been tried in Spain, for Communist activities and later left for South America, ostensibly to Argentina in 1951. Thereafter, all trace of Peña Marin were lost. Regarding Perez Dueño, Spanish Police had identified Communists in Spain known as Perez Dueño. All had been placed under surveillance.

In a meeting with Balfour, Barcenas expressed grave concern. The conspirators were thought to command ample funds and the existence in England and Gibraltar of 'Red' exiles with Communist affiliations was no trivial matter.



Figure 6: Communist Cold War Propaganda - Public Domain https://es.gw2ru.com/cultura/15369-carteles-sovieticos-antiestadounidenses-guerra-fria



Figure 7: Sindicato de Trabajadores Españoles de Gibraltar (STEG) Greeting card

The British Embassy in Madrid found no trace of either individual in their records. However, an American friend of Balfour's had found a Perez Dueño in an F.B.I. report made in 1945, in Buenos Aires. At the time Perez Dueño was an important member of the Communist Party in that city. London and Buenos Aires were telegraphed for traces and briefs were sent to Gibraltar and Tangier (TNA, 1954). An urgent investigation was conducted regarding the whereabouts of the two Communists with no results. It later emerged that the Spanish Ministry's source was no more than an anonymous letter received by a Spanish mission abroad.

The eagerness of Franco's Ministry to share information aroused British suspicion. The possibility might exist were the Spanish Ministry considered it expedient to demonstrate that the threats to the Queen were expected from the Communists rather than the Falange. The question of the repatriates also generated British skepticism. The thinking was that Soviet-trained agents arriving in Spain would be tasked to spy on American bases rather than for acting against the Queen's visit, which was to take place very soon after their arrival in Spain.

There was also speculation regarding the infiltration of Communists into the Falange-controlled Syndicates. Point made by the Spanish Ministry and the Ecclesiastical Advisory Committee of the Spanish National Syndical Organization (TNA, 1954). Presumably, Communists had already penetrated the Syndicates. Of particular concern was the infiltration of the *Sindicato de Trabajadores Españoles de Gibraltar* (STEG), the Spanish Trade Union, based at La Linea de la Concepcion, to which all members of the Spanish labour force in Gibraltar were obliged to join.

Reference had been made to certain STEG officials known to have extreme left-wing antecedents, who maintained relations with active Communists in Gibraltar and La Linea. Danger was perceived regarding the possibility of infiltrated Communists sympathizers and crypto-communists posing as loyal Falangists, operating under cover of the trade unions. There was very real concern about the possibility of Communist agents being infiltrated from outside trying to lure people with left-wing sympathies to perpetrate acts of violence during the Queen's visit. These overlapping threats necessitated a sophisticated, multi-layered security operation, involving unprecedented coordination between colonial intelligence and metropolitan agencies..

Further news was received regarding a possible (crazy) attempt by Falangists to fire smoke bombs from Algeciras across the bay at Gibraltar. DSO deemed the action unlikely, simply because of the constant shifts the westerly winds are subjected to. He said,

"... they might only succeed in blotting out a part of the Spanish mainland." (TNA, 1954)

As predicted, the smoke bomb idiocy came to nothing. The local security aspect also required consideration. MacMillan said

that about seventy resident aliens had been identified and the doubtful weeded out to be excluded from Gibraltar during the Queen's visit. Those who were unable to leave were placed under individual surveillance. Regarding locals, twenty were identified, who required general supervision and a further ten required dedicated surveillance.

The possibility of further demonstrations during the Queen's visit was also considered. However, this was deemed unlikely because Franco might be hesitant to provoke a repetition of the unfavorable reaction in the United States, Europe and Spain which followed the demonstrations fiasco. As to the possibility of Falange or Communists sponsored demonstrations inside Gibraltar during the visit, DSO remarked that would amount to the utmost folly. However, in the unlikely event this might take place,

"... I could have no certain means of controlling what might happen. Even a mild demonstration might easily be converted into a noisy and contraproducente brawl." (TNA, 1954)

Nothing happened.

Even the possibility of protests on the Neutral Ground was looked at. It became apparent that if demonstrators (who had clashed with the Falange and Police during the January demonstrations) were to swell there, a risk existed were the protesters could line up at the frontier and cause trouble.

Finally, Franco confined the action in the Gibraltar area to what he considered to be a dignified act of protest at San Roque. Nevertheless, reports had reached the British Embassy of the possibility of a nation-wide, one-minute silence observance. Further information received spoke about the installation of loud-hailers at La Linea, the laying of smokescreens near the frontier, and the ironical firing of a 22-gun salute as would fit the head of a foreign state when landing in Spain.

No demonstrations took place. The Military Governor of Algeciras, General Cuesta Monereo had explicit instructions from Madrid, barring any protests during the Queen's stay to avoid escalation.



Figure 8: Queen Elizabeth greets the crowds at Catalan Bay, 11th May 1954

Spanish State officials stated publicly that the grave international tension caused by the Communist drive for Southeast Asia, dissuaded Spain from undertaking action that might seem.

"Inopportune to other Western powers at this particular time." (The New York Times, 1954)

On 10 May 1954, the Queen arrived at Gibraltar. Despite the threats, the visit transpired without incident. The following day Her Majesty sailed out of Gibraltar never to return. (Ellicott, D, 2008:123-124)

Conclusions

The 1954 Royal visit to Gibraltar stands as a testament to British diplomatic resilience in the face of post-war colonial tension. While the visit was successfully executed without physical incident, its aftermath reshaped Anglo-Spanish relations for the remainder of the 20th century. Refusing to capitulate to Franco's demands or the spectre of Falangist and Communist threats, the British government reinforced its sovereign claim over the Rock, effectively winning a high-stake round of political brinkmanship.

However, this victory came at a cost; the visit became the catalyst for Franco's "bitter" policy of isolation, leading to the tightening of frontier restrictions that would eventually culminate in the total closure of 1969. Ultimately, while the security detail led by MI5 and DSO neutralized the immediate "Royal threat," the 1954 tour ensured that the "Gibraltar Question" would remain a volatile and unresolved fixture of European diplomacy for decades to come.

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Figure 9: The Queen & Prince Phillip are driven through Gibraltar's City Centre, 10th May 1954

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