

## Spain and its Relationship with the Axis and Allies in WWII – David Gray.

In a previous article about the paper shortage in Britain I touched on the subject of Britain importing Mercury from Spain during WWII and thought it might be an interesting story to investigate. Having now done this I have created this article to show how this shady aspect of WWII was carried out, and how Spain walked the tightrope between the Axis and Allied camps.

Mercury (the element, symbol **Hg**) is a naturally occurring metal found in the Earth's crust.

### 1. Natural Sources

- **Minerals:** The main source of mercury is the mineral **cinnabar** (mercury sulfide, HgS). Cinnabar is mined and then heated to release mercury vapor, which is condensed into liquid mercury.
- **Volcanic activity:** Volcanoes naturally release mercury into the atmosphere.
- **Geothermal vents and erosion:** These can also release mercury from rocks and soil into the environment.

### 2. Human Activities

- **Mining and industrial use:** Mercury has been used in gold mining (especially in artisanal mining), thermometers, fluorescent lights, batteries, and certain chemical manufacturing.
- **Coal burning:** Burning coal in power plants releases mercury into the air because coal contains trace amounts of it.

Mercury is mined in only a few places today, as its use has declined due to environmental and health concerns.

## The War

During World War II, **Germany and Spain maintained economic relations** despite Spain's official neutrality. Trade between the two countries had to navigate wartime blockades and Allied control of the seas. Here's a breakdown of the **routes and methods** used:

### 1. Overland Routes (Primary Means)

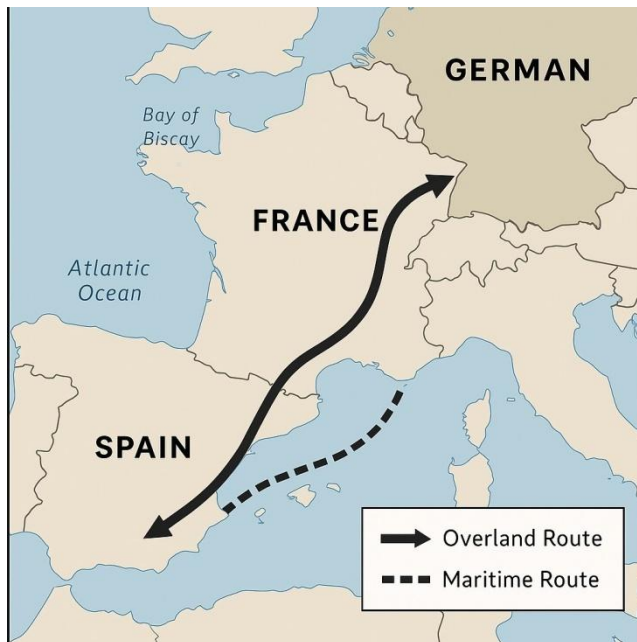
- **France was the key transit country.**  
After Germany occupied France in 1940, overland transport through Vichy or German-occupied France became the main route.
- **Trains and trucks** carried goods from Germany through **France and across the Pyrenees into Spain**, and vice versa.
- This route was relatively secure compared to sea routes, and was the main channel for exports like coal, machinery, and weapons, and imports like tungsten (wolfram), foodstuffs, and minerals.

### 2. Maritime Routes (Limited Use)

- Trade by **sea was risky and limited** due to British naval dominance.
- Some **neutral-flagged Spanish ships** transported goods via:
  - The **Bay of Biscay** (heavily monitored and risky),
  - **Spanish ports like Bilbao, Santander, and Cádiz**,
  - Occasionally **Portuguese ports** were used as intermediaries.
- Germany tried to use **blockade runners and submarines** (U-boats) to move strategic materials, but with limited success.

### 3. Through Portugal (Secondary Land Route)

- Spain and **Portugal were both neutral**, and there was some indirect trade between Germany and Spain via Portugal.
- Portugal served as a discreet middleman, especially for **financial transactions, tungsten exports**, and diplomatic messaging.



*Left, Alternative overland and sea routes between Spain and Germany.*

### Strategic Importance

Spain exported critical resources like **tungsten (used in German armour-piercing shells)**, food, and iron ore to Germany. In return, it received industrial goods, fuel, and political favours. The Allies tried to block or reduce this trade through **diplomatic pressure and economic incentives**, especially targeting the tungsten trade.

Spain, officially neutral during World War II, **did not export large-scale armaments** like tanks, planes, or artillery. However, its arms exports were **more nuanced** and had some indirect military significance:

### What Spain Exported (Direct & Indirect)

1. **Raw materials for armaments:**
  - **Tungsten (wolfram):** Crucial for German armour-piercing shells.
  - **Iron ore, pyrites, zinc, and mercury:** All used in weapons manufacturing.
2. **Small arms and ammunition:**
  - Spain did export **some small arms and ammo**, often surplus from the Spanish Civil War.
  - These were occasionally sent to Axis-aligned countries or used in covert support.
3. **Aircraft repairs and parts (limited):**
  - Spain allowed some Axis aircraft to **land, refuel, or undergo repairs**, especially early in the war.
  - Spanish factories also may have produced or refurbished minor aircraft components, though not officially for export.

4. **Sale or transfer to sympathetic groups:**
  - Arms and supplies were occasionally channelled to pro-Axis forces, like **Vichy France** or even fascist-aligned factions in Latin America.

#### **Why Not More?**

- Spain was recovering from the **Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)** and lacked the industrial capacity for large-scale arms production.
- Franco's government **walked a diplomatic tightrope**, trying to appease both the Axis and Allies while preserving sovereignty and avoiding invasion or economic collapse.

**Franco's secret dealings** and the **tungsten tug-of-war** that had both the Nazis and Allies sweating.

#### **1. Tungsten: The Strategic Metal**

- **Tungsten (a.k.a. wolfram)** was vital for making **armor-piercing shells**—its hardness and high melting point made it ideal.
- Spain, along with Portugal, was one of **the top global sources** of tungsten.
- Germany **desperately needed it** for its war machine.

#### **2. Franco's Double Game**

Franco played both sides:

- He **sold tungsten to Germany**, helping the Nazi war effort.
- At the same time, he **assured the Allies** of neutrality and limited trade with the Axis—just enough to avoid getting embargoed or invaded.

Spain even set up **two official tungsten pricing systems**:

- **One for Germany** (cheaper, more accessible),
- **One for others**, to appear neutral.

#### **3. Allied Response: Economic Warfare**

The Allies knew what was up and hit back with a combination of:

- **Diplomatic pressure:** Roosevelt and Churchill personally pushed Franco to stop tungsten exports.
- **Blacklists & embargoes:** Spain was targeted in economic blockades.
- **Buying up the supply:** The U.S. and Britain began a campaign to **buy out Spain's entire tungsten output** just to keep it away from Germany. This tactic is known as "**preclusive buying**."

By **1944**, Spain finally **cut off tungsten exports to Germany**, partly due to:

- Allied threats,
- Fear of postwar punishment,
- Germany's weakening position.

#### **4. Secret Support to Axis Sympathizers**

- Franco's regime **quietly supported pro-Axis groups**, especially in Latin America and North Africa.
- Spanish diplomats sometimes helped **Axis agents or spies** operate under diplomatic cover.
- **The Blue Division (División Azul):** 18,000+ Spanish volunteers fought alongside the German army on the Eastern Front. Though not officially state-sanctioned war, it was a pretty loud wink at Hitler.

## Britain and Spain

During World War II, Britain and Spain engaged in **limited and strategic trade**, despite Spain's official neutrality. The trade was shaped by political manoeuvring, economic necessity, and attempts to influence Spain's stance in the war. Here's a breakdown:

### 1. British Imports from Spain:

- **Tungsten (Wolfram):** A critical material for hardening steel and vital to arms production. Britain and Germany both competed for Spain's tungsten.
- **Citrus fruits and other agricultural products:** Spain was a source of fresh produce, which Britain needed due to wartime shortages.
- **Mercury:** Used in explosives and other war-related applications.

### 2. British Exports to Spain:

- **Coal:** Spain was dependent on coal imports, and Britain supplied some to maintain influence and prevent Spain from relying solely on Germany.
- **Oil and refined petroleum products:** Though controlled and monitored, Britain sometimes allowed small exports to keep Spain diplomatically balanced.
- **Industrial goods and chemicals:** Essential for Spain's economy, and used by Britain as leverage.

### 3. Strategic Purpose:

The goal was to **keep Spain neutral** and **out of the Axis orbit**. Britain used trade, especially of coal and other essentials, as a **diplomatic tool** to ensure Spain didn't allow German forces into Gibraltar or the Mediterranean. So, while the trade wasn't massive, it was **highly strategic** and part of a larger effort to maintain geopolitical stability in the region. During World War II, British ships delivering cargo to Spain had to navigate **carefully controlled and monitored sea routes**, due to the constant threat from German U-boats, mines, and aerial attacks. Here's how they generally operated:

## Routes Taken by British Ships to Spain

### Primary Route:

British ships usually sailed from ports in **Britain (like Liverpool, Bristol, or London)** and passed through the **Atlantic Ocean**, avoiding the English Channel when possible due to heavy German patrols.

### Southwest Approach:

Ships typically sailed **southwest around the western coast of France**, staying in **Allied-controlled waters** as much as possible. From there, they passed **west of Portugal** and approached **northwestern Spain** or sailed further south to reach southern Spanish ports.

### Convoys:

Many shipments were sent as part of **convoys**, protected by British or Allied naval escorts. These convoys were organized to reduce the risk of submarine attacks.

## Main Spanish Ports Used

Despite Spain's neutrality, Britain had access to a few Spanish ports through diplomatic agreements and commercial arrangements:

- **La Coruña (A Coruña):** On the northwest coast of Spain. A relatively safe port from the Atlantic side.
- **Vigo:** Another port in northwestern Spain, often used for shipments like fish and tungsten.
- **Bilbao or Santander:** Northern ports closer to France; used less frequently due to proximity to Axis-occupied territory.
- **Cádiz or Huelva:** Southern ports near the Strait of Gibraltar—vital for trade and intelligence gathering.
- **Barcelona or Valencia:** Eastern Mediterranean ports, occasionally used but riskier due to Axis naval activity in the Mediterranean.

### Secrecy and Control

- Shipments were often **carefully negotiated** and disguised as commercial trade to maintain Spanish neutrality.
- **British intelligence and diplomats** monitored these routes closely to avoid German interception and to ensure the shipments didn't indirectly support the Axis.

So, British trade to Spain during WWII involved a mix of **strategic routing, diplomatic finesse, and naval protection** to ensure cargo could reach Spanish ports without drawing Axis retaliation or political backlash.

### Air Route

Yes, there **was an air route** from Britain to Spain during World War II, but it was **limited, controlled, and mostly used for diplomatic, intelligence, and special missions**, not regular commercial trade.

**Key Points about the Air Route:**

#### 1. Purpose of the Air Route

- **Diplomatic Missions:** Used by British diplomats and officials travelling to and from Spain.
- **Intelligence Operations:** MI6 and Special Operations Executive (SOE) used air routes for espionage, courier missions, and sometimes inserting or extracting agents.
- **Courier Services:** Carried diplomatic pouches, communications, and high-priority passengers.

#### 2. Route Characteristics

- Flights usually originated in **southern England**, such as from **RAF stations** near London or Bristol.
- They would often route over the **Atlantic**, avoiding **German-occupied France**, then curve down past Portugal (a neutral country and safer airspace), and enter **Spain via its western or central region**.
- Some flights went via **Gibraltar**, a key British stronghold, then into southern Spain, often landing near **Madrid** or other agreed-upon locations.

#### 3. Airports Used in Spain

- **Madrid (Barajas Airport):** The main destination for diplomatic flights.
- **Barcelona or Seville:** Occasionally used, depending on the mission and conditions.
- Sometimes secret landings occurred in more remote areas for clandestine operations.

#### **4. Aircraft Used**

- Smaller, long-range aircraft like the **Lysander**, **Lockheed Hudson**, or **Douglas DC-3 (Dakota)** were often used—especially for covert ops.
- These planes could fly at night, land in rough conditions, or be used for pick-up/drop-off missions.

#### **5. Risk and Restrictions**

- Flights had to navigate **neutral airspace rules** carefully to avoid provoking the Axis or violating Spanish neutrality.
- Spain, though neutral, was **under Axis pressure**, so flights were rare, secretive, and usually tied to intelligence or high-level diplomacy.

#### **In Summary:**

There **was an air route** from Britain to Spain, but it was **not commercial or routine**. It was mostly used for **covert, diplomatic, or intelligence-related purposes**, carefully managed to maintain Spain's neutrality and avoid Axis detection or interference.

#### **Help for Escaping Allied Forces**

Yes, **Spain did help some escaping British prisoners of war (POWs)** and downed airmen get back to Britain during World War II — **unofficially and selectively**.

#### **Here's how it worked:**

##### **1. Spain's Neutral Status**

- Spain, under **Francisco Franco**, remained officially **neutral**, but it leaned slightly toward the Axis early in the war and shifted more toward the Allies later.
- As a neutral country, Spain was obligated to **intern foreign soldiers**, not return them to their countries — but there was **considerable flexibility** in practice.

##### **2. The Escape Route Through Spain**

- Many **British and Allied POWs** escaped from **occupied France** and made their way south toward the **Pyrenees Mountains**.
- With the help of **resistance networks** like the **Comet Line** or **Pat O'Leary Line**, they crossed the Pyrenees into **neutral Spain** — often in harsh conditions.

##### **3. What Happened in Spain**

- Once in Spain, escapees were often **detained by Spanish authorities** (usually the Guardia Civil).
- Most were **interned briefly** in places like **Miranda de Ebro**, a camp in northern Spain.
- However, thanks to British diplomatic pressure and negotiation — especially through the **British Embassy in Madrid** — most were **released into British custody** within a few weeks or months.

##### **4. Return to Britain**

- After release, escapees were typically taken to **Gibraltar**, the British-controlled territory at the southern tip of Spain.
- From Gibraltar, they were **flown or shipped back to Britain**.

##### **5. Cooperation from Spain**

- Though not always openly supportive, **Spain quietly allowed this process to happen** — partly to maintain good relations with the Allies and partly due to humanitarian reasons.

- British diplomats, especially **Sir Samuel Hoare**, the ambassador in Madrid, played a key role in smoothing these arrangements.

#### Summary:

**Yes, Spain did help** — indirectly and sometimes reluctantly — by **allowing escaped British prisoners to be transferred through Spain and repatriated via Gibraltar**. It was a quiet but important form of cooperation during the war.

Let's delve into the intricate web of **Franco's clandestine dealings** and the **tungsten (wolfram) trade** between Spain and Nazi Germany during World War II.

#### The Wolfram Crisis: A Strategic Tug-of-War

**Tungsten**, known as *wolfram* in Europe, was indispensable for Germany's war machinery, particularly in producing armour-piercing shells and hardened steel components. Spain, being the world's second-largest producer after Portugal, became a focal point in the struggle between the Axis and Allied powers.

From 1941 to 1943, Spain exported over **1,100 metric tons annually** of wolfram to Germany, satisfying more than 30% of Germany's industrial requirements. This trade was highly lucrative for Spain, with tungsten exports skyrocketing from £73,000 in 1940 to £15.7 million in 1943, accounting for nearly 1% of Spain's GDP and 20% of its exports by 1943–44.

#### Franco's Diplomatic Balancing Act

While publicly maintaining neutrality, Franco's regime engaged in covert operations to support the Axis powers:

- **Espionage Support:** Spain harboured German spies and saboteurs, providing them with logistical support.
- **The Blue Division:** Spain sent over 18,000 volunteers to fight alongside German forces on the Eastern Front, signalling tacit support for Hitler's war efforts.
- **Trade in Precious Materials:** Spanish merchants facilitated the transfer of industrial diamonds and platinum to Germany, often smuggled from Latin America and Africa.

#### Allied Countermeasures: Economic Warfare

To curb Spain's support for Germany, the Allies employed several strategies:

- **Preclusive Purchasing:** The Allies, particularly Britain and the U.S., engaged in preclusive buying—purchasing Spain's entire tungsten output to prevent it from reaching Germany.
- **Oil Embargoes:** In January 1944, the U.S. imposed an oil embargo on Spain, a critical move given Spain's dependence on imported oil.
- **Diplomatic Pressure:** The Allies demanded Spain cease all tungsten exports to Germany, expel German agents, and close German consulates, notably in Tangier.

#### The May 1944 Agreement: A Compromise

Facing mounting pressure, Spain entered into a secret agreement with the U.S. and the U.K. on May 2, 1944. Spain committed to:

- **Limiting tungsten exports** to Germany to 20 tons in May and June, and 40 tons thereafter.
- **Closing the German Consulate** in Tangier and expelling its members.
- **Preventing logistical support** to Germans in airports.
- **Expelling German spies and saboteurs** from Spanish territory.
- **Recalling Spanish volunteers** from the Eastern Front.

Despite these commitments, clandestine shipments continued, with over 800 tons of tungsten smuggled to Germany through July 1944.

### **The Decline of the Tungsten Trade**

The Normandy landings in June 1944 and the subsequent Allied advances made it increasingly difficult for Spain to continue its covert support. By August 1944, Spain closed its border with France, effectively ending tungsten exports to Germany. It wasn't until April 1945 that Spain severed diplomatic relations with Germany.

**After reading this article, fellow member Simon Wilson has forwarded the following observations:**

Two anecdotes for Spanish neutrality for you - one from the uncle of someone I know - he trained on Swordfish with FAA and qualified late in the war. He was actually only shot at once in his service career - the Spanish opened fire on him when he flew into their airspace whilst flying past Gibraltar. The other was the father of a coin dealer in Nottingham - he was in a Lancaster which got hit on a raid, so they diverted to Spain and internment rather than coming down over France and being POWs. They landed, set fire to the a/c to destroy the secret equipment and spent several weeks in Spain eating well and relaxing. On their return home they were carpentered for destroying the plane as standard practice was to swap the plane for the return of the crew. Because they set fire to it the Govt had to pay a ransom (a large amount of fuel - can't remember how much - sorry) to get them back.

It strikes me that Sweden, Spain and Switzerland all did quite well out of the war. Switzerland, with its Nazi gold, still is.