

Researching Modern International History in Madrid

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Scholars who research and write about the foreign affairs of Iberia are, quite naturally, drawn to the histories of the great Spanish Empire. Many of them treat post-imperial Spain as an aberration from the rest of Europe. However, some historians now believe that Spain remained an important presence in the international community long after the slow decline of Spanish power that began in the late seventeenth century and was apparent to all by the time of the French Revolution.¹ This new perspective on the importance of post-imperial Spain has not led to a mad rush into the archives of Iberia. Yet there are many topics of interest from the post-imperial era that are deserving of more attention, including the 1823 French intervention against Spain's liberal government; the colonial wars Spain fought alongside France in Morocco in the 1920s; the Spanish Civil War and its international implications; and the semi-fascist dictatorship in post-1945 Spain, delicately balancing its commitment to authoritarian rule with its participation in the Atlantic Alliance.

International historians and SHAFR members who are interested in foreign affairs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will be drawn to Madrid for the wealth of archival material available there. The Archivo Historico Nacional has a limited number of state documents concerning foreign affairs, most especially relating to the last third of the eighteenth century and the Napoleonic era. The majority of relevant documents, however, are held in smaller archives. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs maintains its own archive inside its offices at the Palacio Santa Cruz, just off the Plaza Mayor in the center of the city. This is the

¹ Sebastian Balfour and Paul Preston, eds., *Spain and the Great Powers in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1999) 1.

primary archive for anyone researching world policy since the late eighteenth century. Its main holdings consist of the paperwork produced by members of the Foreign Ministry in Spain and across the world, but it has important special collections as well. One of these is the collection of papers from the Republican government-in-exile between 1939 and 1954, which documents the Republicans' failed effort to find international support for their cause in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. Additionally, the collection of personal papers, called Archivos Particulares, holds the records of Juan Negrín, who was prime minister during the Civil War (1937-39). For those wishing to pursue a topic in greater depth, the Archivo General de la Administración, just outside of Madrid in Alcala de Henares, holds records from a variety of government entities, including Foreign Ministry files from the years 1711 to 1981 from embassies, legations and consulates. Files from the Washington embassy and important American consulates like New York will be of special interest to SHAFR members. For those interested in the diplomacy of imperialism and decolonization, the records of the Diplomatic Cabinet of the Spanish High Commission in Morocco (1909-1956) are also housed in Alcala.

Both archives are easy to access. Two photographs are required, plus a passport or national identification card, and researchers are asked to take a few minutes to fill out an information form. Both archives provide lockers for jackets and other items, and both allow researchers to begin ordering documents and doing research the first day. For those who are accustomed to working in major archival repositories such as the National Archives in College Park or the National Archive-Public Record Office outside of London, these two archives will seem quaint, but their small scale makes them enjoyable places to work.

However, their small size also means that there are some practices here that researchers may not be familiar with. Unlike the larger archives and libraries in Madrid, such as the Archivo Historico Nacional and the Biblioteca Nacional, which have much more in common with facilities like the National Archives in College Park, these two archives have yet to give up the afternoon siesta. The Foreign Ministry archive closes at 2:00 P.M., the one in Alcala at 2:30 P.M., and neither reopens. So visitors must be sure to arrive close to opening at 9:00 A.M. and 8:30 A.M., respectively. In reality, this is not a difficult circumstance to adjust to: soon enough the motivated historian comes to relish the lengthy meal and rest that will follow a half-day of research!

The photocopying process is another somewhat archaic ritual at the Foreign Ministry. While photocopying is quite inexpensive, researchers cannot do it themselves. They indicate what they want photocopied from a file, and the staff will take it away and have copies made in a week or so. Researchers must ask when their copies are ready; there is no notification process. And before the staff will actually hand over the photocopies, payment must be deposited in a bank around the corner. This can be frustrating for anyone who tries to get photocopying done at the end of a visit to Madrid, as I did. Luckily for me, wonderful archivists and workers expedited the normal process to have my copies ready before my departure.

The photocopying situation aside, the Archivo General in the Foreign Ministry is a pleasant place to work. There are desk for thirty-two researchers, and most now have plugs for computers. Three microfilm readers are also available. The reading room staff is very friendly, especially once visitors establish themselves as regulars. Documents are organized

into two sections: Archivo Historico, for documents from the mid-to-late eighteenth century through 1931, and Archivo Renovado, for documents from 1931 on. In addition, there are a number of special collections, such as that of the Republican government-in-exile. For the Archivo Renovado, which is the one I have worked with, ordering is done by computer. Documents appear within fifteen to thirty minutes. While only one set of documents can be ordered at a time, the speed with which they are retrieved means there is really little time spent waiting. The online ordering system is efficient but frustrating. Rather than offer a comprehensive search guide online, it operates by keyword search. It is impossible to see a complete listing of files, so researchers can never be quite sure they have all the references they need. And because the numbering system of the Archivo Renovado is not organized in an obvious way, simply ordering one set of files after another numerically will not guarantee that researchers will see everything of relevance. The only way to be comprehensive is to experiment with keyword searches.

The secondary archive in Alcala de Henares, the Archivo General de la Administración, is a forty-minute train ride from Madrid's Atocha train station. Trains leave every fifteen to forty minutes throughout the day. From the Alcala train station, the archive is a fifteen-to-twenty-minute walk through the modern part of the city. Alcala is the birthplace of Miguel de Cervantes and a traditional university town. The Old Town, which is about a ten-minute walk from the archive, is a great place to find wonderful and inexpensive restaurants.

Like the Foreign Ministry archive in Madrid, the Archivo General de la Administración is small, with forty-seven seats, ten of which have plugs for computers, and

one microfilm reader. Most researchers come to use a variety of government sources, with only a few using the “Embassies, Legations and Consulates” section of Ministry of Foreign Affairs materials. Photocopying is done on site and is again fairly reasonable. The reading room staff here is a bit stricter than at the Foreign Ministry in Madrid, allowing pencils only and forbidding the use of dictionaries or other books at the desks. The archivists are very approachable, however, and they know the collection well. There are two sets of finding aids one must consult before a document can be ordered, and the archivists will guide researchers through them quite quickly.

As noted, both archives register researchers upon arrival; all that is needed is a passport or national identity card and two photographs, and researchers can begin working that day. Since the Archivo General de la Administración is part of the Ministry of Culture’s archive system, it issues the National Research Card, which is good at all ministry-run archives in Spain; the Foreign Ministry is one of the few government departments that operates its own archive.

Much can be found at these archives, which are especially underused when it comes to nineteenth- and twentieth-century international history (the same is true of the Archive of the Spanish Civil War in Salamanca). Very few non-Spaniards seem to have discovered them. However, research at these institutions can be frustrating. Their small size creates some problems. In addition, if researchers are working on a fairly secretive dictatorship like that of General Francisco Franco, they will often find large gaps in the documentation, which probably reflect that government’s general disregard for record-keeping more than any desire to expunge the record. The frustration engendered by these gaps, of course, is sometimes

compensated for by the excitement of finding something significant and substantial.

Researchers who come to these archives determined to work through the complications and frustrations may find that their persistence ultimately pays dividends. If it does not, they will at least have enjoyed many long afternoon meals and spent time in one of the liveliest and most inviting of Europe's capital cities.

**El Archivo General del
Ministerio de Asuntos
Exteriores**
Plaza de la Provincia, 1
28012-Madrid
<http://www.mae.es>

M-F 9:30-14:00

**Archivo General de la
Administración**
C/ Paseo de Aguadores, 2
28871 Alcalá de Henares
[http://www.mcu.es/
archivos/index.jsp](http://www.mcu.es/archivos/index.jsp)

M-F 9:30-14:30