



# The Spaniards and Gibraltar: Much Ado About Nothing?

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## THE SPANIARDS AND GIBRALTAR: MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING?

“Bone of contention,” “obstacle,” “anachronism”: such negative terms and many others have been used for years by politicians and scholars all around the world to qualify the situation of Gibraltar. Journalists too insist on the bitter dispute between London or Gibraltar on the one hand, and Madrid on the other. Words such as “resistance” or “pressure” often appear in their titles, whether the articles were written in the 1950s or very recently (“The Rock of Contention: Spanish Pressure on Gibraltar,” *The Round Table*, 1965; “The Land of Broken Plates,” *Time*, 1999). Do reporters lack originality or is the case of Gibraltar and Spain the longest cold war ever? What makes it so difficult to find a solution to the problem posed by this tiny British rock situated at the southernmost tip of the Iberian Peninsula and claimed with insistence by its big neighbour, Spain?

### Gibraltar: a colony?

The Rock has a history of its own and is definitely not a traditional case of colonialism. Actually, in 1704 nearly all the Spanish inhabitants of Gibraltar chose to leave when the Anglo-Dutch invaders took possession of the territory. Admiral Rooke and his men did not colonise a population but only a rocky promontory of 6 sq. km. The place had no spring, river or natural resources; however, its key strategic position, between two seas and two continents, was very valuable at the time.

Since the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Gibraltar has been peopled by members of the British Army and by a growing number of civilians of various nationalities who settled there fully aware that they would from then on live under British rule. Today, the inhabitants of the enclave are neither of Spanish nor of English blood exclusively: they are Mediterranean people whose roots can be traced to Genoa and the rest of Italy, to Portugal, Malta, Spain, the British Isles, North Africa, etc. Gibraltarians are a unique ethnic and cultural mix, and their ancestors did not arrive on the Rock more than three centuries ago. Unlike the native peoples of Kenya or India, who had lived in their countries for generations before they fought for independence, Gibraltarians would never have been able to throw their colonisers out to recover their full sovereignty because they have never been independent of Britain, and have always valued their Britishness. Now citizens of what London discreetly calls an “overseas territory,” they would even like to be integrated with the “motherland.” In such circumstances, are the Spanish demands for “decolonisation of Gibraltar” justified and, above all, meaningful?

Only the few non-Gibraltarian British persons who work on the Rock and sometimes settle there could “go back home”; but they represent less than one-seventh of a total population of 30,000 inhabitants. In any case, if these residents left Gibraltar, those staying behind would never be fully Spanish nor willing to become Spanish. So if “decolonising” means “giving a land back to its people,” Gibraltar cannot possibly be decolonised for it already belongs to the Gibraltarians. Neither would it be realistic to hand it over to the descendants of the Spaniards who used to live there in 1704. Some of the defenders of a Spanish Gibraltar still reside in San Roque, an Andalusian town nearby founded by their Gibraltarian Spanish forebears. In fact, even they acknowledge that, if they were to see the Rock reintegrated into the Spanish national territory, they would not move from their village to *El Peñón* anyway.

The other difficulties Gibraltarians have to face lie in the parallel often drawn between their territory and Hong Kong: the Spaniards assert that the Rock could now become theirs by the same process as Hong Kong was transferred from Britain to China a few years ago. But the conditions of British occupation in Gibraltar and in the Far-Eastern colony were quite different. Gibraltar was officially ceded in perpetuity to the British Crown by the Kingdom of Spain under the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. As for Hong Kong, it was first ceded to Britain by China in perpetuity, but in 1898 the two sides, meeting in Peking, agreed that most of the colony — the New Territories — would be held by Britain under a 99-year lease. In 1984, however, London decided that Hong Kong as a whole would be returned to China in 1997, i.e. the New Territories as well as the island of Victoria and the peninsula of Kowloon, both of which the British could have kept forever. A Spanish

journalist jumped to the — too easy — conclusion that “[Britain had] recognised that its sovereignty over Victoria and Kowloon was based upon an outmoded colonial system, which now operated only in places like Hong Kong and Gibraltar” (quoted without ref. by Peter Gold, *A Stone in Spain's Shoe*, 1994, 73), although the real reason for this change was simply that the New Territories formed 92 per cent of Hong Kong and that the rest, Victoria and Kowloon, would not have been viable separately, so there was no reason for the British to hold on to them.

### **The Spanish definition of a colony**

Madrid keeps saying that Gibraltar should no longer be British. Since the days of General Franco, the vocabulary and the arguments have been the same, whatever the political leanings of the government. Spanish ministers complain that Gibraltar is the last colony in Europe, and consider this situation “anachronistic” and “morally intolerable” (Peter Gold, 101). And yet, their proposed alternative to British “colonialism” is not self-determination for the people of Gibraltar; on the contrary, Spain would like to see the Rock “decolonised” only to be able to have it come within its jurisdiction against the wishes of the Gibraltarians, who have always refused to become Spanish. In September 1967, they were asked in a referendum whether they preferred to remain British or to pass under Spanish sovereignty. Only 44 of them were willing to become Spanish nationals, whereas 12,138 expressed their allegiance to the United Kingdom. In November 2002, a new referendum was organised with a slightly different option, and the answer was just as manifest: 99 per cent of the voters rejected a system of co-sovereignty over their land, proving that they were more determined than ever to stay out of Spain.

Of course, even if the Rock has had its own local government for decades, an increasing number of Gibraltarians would like their homeland to be granted a new status, but without being integrated with Spain. At the moment, the Spaniards are blocking any move in this direction, claiming that the only option for the Gibraltarians is to join them. What really annoys Madrid is not the fact that the territory is a colony, but that it does not belong to Spain — a contradictory attitude bordering on neo-colonialism which does not seem to shock anybody, either in Spain or in the European Union, let alone the United Nations. One should remember that in 1969, Franco closed the border between his country and Gibraltar — a border which is in fact the only land frontier the Rock has —, thus imposing the longest “siege” the enclave has ever been subjected to. The dictator died in 1975, but it took King Juan Carlos and his ministers many years to fully reopen the gate, although Spain was supposed to have switched to democracy. Actually the blockade was longer under the new democracy (ten years) than under Franco’s dictatorship (six years). It was only because Spain was eager to join the European Community, and would never have been admitted if it had continued to ban communications with Gibraltar, that it reopened the border, by strategy. But nowadays, the pressure remains: not only is crossing the border still a hassle because of the numerous checks, but Madrid’s attitude has not changed either: it still refuses to recognise Gibraltarians as a people. Which situation is anachronistic, then: is it the British flag flying on the Rock, or the Spanish claim?

Another recent event shows that the Spaniards’ attitude can be even more colonialistic than the stance they reproach the Britons with. In November 1987, London and Madrid agreed on a joint use of the Gibraltar airport by Gibraltarian, British and Spanish aircraft. The document they signed stipulated that it was subject to the approval of the Gibraltar Parliament, which immediately vetoed it. The Spanish authorities tried to convince London to do without the Gibraltarians’ consent, and even suggested that the Governor of Gibraltar should use its reserve powers to impose the decision. Spain was complaining, on the one hand, that the Rock was still a British colony; on the other, that the British authorities were not colonialistic enough. Indeed, London refused to force the Gibraltarians to approve the airport agreement.

### **Mistakes on both sides**

If many Spanish scholars or politicians do not accept to take the Gibraltarians into account, London too made quite a lot of mistakes in the past. From 1704 to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

the authorities often changed their minds as to how useful or valuable Gibraltar was to Britain, and they were unable to decide what they were going to do with it, whether they should maintain British rule or sell the Rock. Some British statesmen contemplated exchanging the colony for another territory, which would have had the double advantage of choosing a new place of strategic importance, and of getting rid of this bone of contention between the UK and Spain. This attitude prevailed all along the 18<sup>th</sup> century; it even manifested itself more recently, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in 1940.

In 1967, by organising the referendum, London showed at last that it was starting to consider the Gibraltarians as a real people who had the right to decide their future. Nevertheless, as Madrid's point of view has not changed, the continuing existence of the British territory claimed by Spain is still poisoning relationships within the European Union. Spain periodically blocks the vote of directives which it thinks could lead to giving more legitimacy or rights to the people of Gibraltar — who became citizens of the EEC more than ten years before the Spanish did. Sometimes, Madrid even blackmails the other Member States, as for instance when it refused to discuss the “open skies” issue as long as its partners took Gibraltar's airport into account.

Spanish ministers insist that Spain should recover sovereignty over Gibraltar as if it were a mere piece of land without anybody living on it. When it comes to negotiation, they maintain that the Rock ought to be decolonised, and that the integrity of their national territory is paramount. At the same time, they still refuse to consider granting the Gibraltarians self-determination; they never address the authorities of the colony directly, nor do they accept Gibraltarian representatives as a third party in talks with Britain — they can only be part of the British delegation as observers. Indeed Madrid still does not recognise the government of Gibraltar. The residents of the Rock, on the contrary, consider that the future status of their homeland should be debated exclusively by themselves and London.

## **A dialogue of the deaf**

When it comes to the issue of Gibraltar, communication between London and Madrid seems thoroughly impossible. Former Gibraltar Chief Minister Joe Bossano says that “[the two governments] repeat to each other incompatible messages. It's a dialogue of the deaf” (personal interview, 12 Sept. 2001). And in fact, this unequivocal expression has been used for years, by Gibraltarians and foreign journalists alike, to describe the sterile negotiation process. However, communication is also difficult between Gibraltar and London and, at present, the inhabitants of the Rock are convinced that the government of the UK is not supporting them as it should or as it promised to. After having granted Gibraltar a government, a parliament and, at the end of the 1960s, a new constitution, the British authorities completely changed their strategy when they accepted, at the beginning of the 1980s, to discuss the matter of sovereignty with the government of Spain.

Today, the British still pretend that Spanish proposals could materialise whereas, unless they betrayed the Gibraltarians and withdrew their protection, they would never force the Rock's residents to agree to their bigger neighbour's rule. But this is not reassuring enough to the Gibraltarians, and another reason for their mistrust of the British Government is that the latter, in order to be on good terms with Madrid, refused to support the 2002 referendum or even take the results into account. Surprisingly, Tony Blair's friendship with former Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar was thus seen as a threat by many a Gibraltarian, who realise that, to London, the political alliance with Spain is probably more vital than the loyalty of a few thousand inhabitants whose existence is unknown to most Europeans.

## **Gibraltar: a “pseudo-problem”**

But if Spain can apparently easily influence Britain, a Spanish professor from the university of Barcelona, Jesús Mosterín, is deeply critical of his country's views on Gibraltar. He regularly publishes articles on the subject in *El País*. In one of them (“Ni español ni británico”), he argues that Gibraltar and its people are Gibraltarian and not Spanish, and that they have the right to be left alone. He goes on to assert that it would be better for all sides if Gibraltar was authorised to form a

small independent state. To him, the only obstacle is Madrid: Spanish diplomats are “hypocritical” and their positions on the question are thoroughly unjustified. About the age-old accusations of illegal activities on the Rock, Jesús Mosterín explains that there is now much less smuggling of tobacco than there used to be, and that only a tiny fraction of the population is, or used to be, involved; as to money laundering, though he finds it unacceptable, he underlines that every country, not just a few tax havens like Gibraltar, is affected by the problem, and that the economic prosperity of the enclave cannot possibly result from it. To Jesús Mosterín, the Rock has always been a “pseudo-problem.”

Indeed, many contradictions appear in Spain’s nationalistic stance and in the arguments it uses. We may wonder whether the Spaniards need fan the flames of the dispute with the Rock. Do they not have enough difficulties with Basque separatism? Which of the two problems is the more serious threat to their national or territorial unity, or even to their fellow citizens? There has never been any violence in Gibraltar, while ETA terrorist actions have caused many casualties. The authorities and people of the Rock would not be a cause for concern to the Spanish leaders if the latter simply stopped focusing on them. It seems as if Madrid were trying to compensate for its failure to fight terrorism by bullying Gibraltar. Or maybe the Spaniards would like to re-appropriate the small territory across the southern border because they fear they may soon lose much more land in the north. Both Gibraltarian people and politicians agree that the “problem” of Gibraltar was actually created by Madrid, which uses the colony as a scapegoat or smokescreen to cover up much more serious internal problems. The Rock dispute would thus only be a way, for the Spanish authorities, to divert the public’s attention from the country’s many troubles. This phenomenon is not new: it dates back to the Franco era. It is described in a book by a French scholar (Jean Mathiex, [1972] 1994), written for a student readership and devoid of any polemical intentions. Finally, a Spaniard, author of one of the latest works published on Gibraltar (Manuel Leguineche, 2002), acknowledges that the *Caudillo* was already using the Rock for the same purposes. The recovery of Gibraltar was seen as the only cause which would unite all Spaniards.

Finally, we can add that the enclave, which has no natural resources, has lost part of its strategic value with the advent of satellite technology and nuclear weapons. Under these conditions, we may wonder why the Spaniards keep on wasting so much energy in attempting to recover such a tiny piece of land: on the map of the Iberian Peninsula, the Rock is a barely visible, insignificant dot. Without the Canary and Balearic Islands, continental Spain covers 492,713 sq. km, more than 82,000 times Gibraltar. Then, how can Madrid objectively claim that the British rock disfigures the map of Spain and destroys its territorial integrity? In fact, the ordinary Spaniards buying this thesis admit that their reasons are not very practical: to most of them, it is simply a matter of honour and national pride.

## Geographical logic?

Indeed the Spaniards argue that the Rock should be reintegrated into their country because, physically, it is part of the geographical unit made up by Spain. If there has to be some logic in the way countries’ borders are designed, then the map of the world is far from being perfect: for instance, why is Alaska a state of the United States and not a province of Canada? Why is the Republic of Ireland deprived of six counties to the north-east, six counties which are part of the neighbouring isle? How can Lesotho be a legitimate sovereign state although it is surrounded by the South African Republic and creates something like a “hole” in the South African territory?

If geographical logic is any good, Spain could go as far as to challenge the independence of Portugal. Interestingly, the argument would be partly justified historically too, as much as the Spanish position on Gibraltar is. From 1580 to 1640, Philip II of Spain was also king of Portugal, whose population finally rebelled. So, a few decades before Gibraltar was taken by the British, Portugal too was part of Spain. But Spain has never called into question its western neighbour’s sovereignty, maybe because it considers that a people’s legitimacy is proportional to the number of its members and to the area on which they live. All this seems quite unfair, especially because the fact that a very small territory was once part of a larger state does not mean that it has to be

reintegrated into it. After all, both Spain and Gibraltar are members of the European Union, and the latter is shortly going to admit a number of very small countries as full-scale member states.

On the other hand, it might be exaggerated — if not completely ridiculous — to insist on comparing tiny Gibraltar to Northern Ireland or Portugal, let alone Alaska. A major difference is that Gibraltar is not independent. If this is sufficient to justify Spanish views, and if we admit that the Rock is undoubtedly part of Spain and ought to be handed over to it, then and in the same way, there is no reason why Ceuta and Melilla should remain Spanish enclaves in Morocco. The two ports, located on the other shore of the strait of Gibraltar, have been under Spain's sovereignty since 1580 and 1497 respectively. They were originally conquered for their convenient location as military bases, just as the Rock was. They have never been called "colonies" but this is the only feature they do not have in common with Gibraltar. Ceuta, situated just south of the Rock, is considered the second "key" to the Mediterranean. It covers 19 sq. km, where 80,000 civilians and 7,000 members of the Spanish military live. As to Melilla, it is slightly smaller, with 12 sq. km and 60,000 inhabitants. Ceuta and Melilla are accused of harbouring the same criminal activities as Gibraltar: they too are tax havens known for the smuggling of tobacco and narcotics (cocaine and cannabis); in addition, it is from there that illegal immigrants from all parts of the African continent try to cross over to Spain, risking their lives on overcrowded boats.

The Spanish Government, while claiming Gibraltar and criticising the British position, also refuses to return Ceuta and Melilla to the Kingdom of Morocco. Spain does not wish to abandon the last pieces of its former colonial empire. Interestingly, Morocco uses exactly the same adjective to refer to the two ports' situation as the Spaniards themselves do regarding Gibraltar: it claims Ceuta and Melilla on the ground that their status is "anachronistic" (Jean et André Sellier, *Atlas des peuples*, [1995] 2000, 64).

When frontiers are altered, not merely geography and politics but also ethics are involved. Is it better to satisfy the territorial claims of a state than to give priority to the aspirations of a people? Perhaps the problems that Gibraltarians experience are mainly due to the cultural gap between them and the Spanish population, which makes communication difficult, even impossible most of the time. From a cultural as well as a political point of view, it is clear that the inhabitants of the Rock are not living in the heart of a controversy, as is often said, but rather of a huge misunderstanding. It is hard to anticipate a resolution of the dispute as long as such a misunderstanding exists.

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