

Gibraltar in the Sixties: British, Spanish and local interests on the Rock

MÓNIKA SZENTE-VARGA
UNIVERSITY OF PANNONIA,
VESZPRÉM

300 years ago, in 1713, Gibraltar was ceded to the British by the Treaty of Utrecht. And for 300 years long, the Spanish have been trying to get it back, using diplomatic and/or military means. This study investigates a 10-year period of intensive pressure making – the 1960's – principally with the help of the *ABC*, a Spanish daily, and a report made in 1969 by Jenő Incze, the Hungarian ambassador in London. The essay is complemented by details on the actual situation of Gibraltar.

The sixties could become a period of intensive diplomatic activity due to the reincorporation of Spain into the international community in the 1950's. Spain, that had been considered as a pariah state since the Allied victory in the Second World War – the United Nations for example called on its members to withdraw their ambassadors from Madrid – was now accepted due to its militant anti-communism. The bipolar world was morally divided into bad and good, that is, into Communists and anti-Communist, and much less consideration was given to democratic institutions. Thus the Cold War ended the isolation of Spain: diplomatic and communication channels were reopened and it could make its comeback on the international scene. For example, diplomatic relations were restored between Spain and Great Britain in 1951; Spain and the United States signed an agreement on military cooperation in 1953; the same year a concordat was reached with the Vatican, and in December 1955 Spain finally became a member of the United Nations. The Spanish leadership did not wait long, and as early as 1957, it announced its claim onto Gibraltar.

1963–65

The forum that Spain used for pressing its interests was the UN. The question of Gibraltar was first discussed in the organisation in 1963, and it was the Special Committee on Decolonisation, also called Committee of 24 (C-24)¹ that passed the first resolution on this issue in September 1964. It called for talks between the British and Spanish

¹ The Committee was established in 1961 with the idea of monitoring the implementation of the General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) of the 14th of December, 1960 (Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples).

governments.² However, Great Britain was reluctant to negotiate because decolonization could have meant the handing over of the territory to Spain, the reason being that according to the Treaty of Utrecht, if the British ever ceded Gibraltar, it should first be offered to Spain. The lack of willingness on behalf of Great Britain, fuelled a series of Spanish punitive actions, initiating with the slowing down of the border crossing between Spain and Gibraltar in 1964. Gibraltar soon started to feel the economic burden of the Spanish steps. As it grew more complicated for goods and later even for people to reach it from Spain, Gibraltar became more dependent on Britain, that is, on British financial help. Yet Great Britain was ready to pay, and contrary to Spanish beliefs, did not let Gibraltar go.

1966

By that time, Spanish foreign policy changed. Not with respect to its goals, but with respect to its means. The Spanish recurred once again to negotiations, maybe because the more drastic steps did not bring about the desired effects. Or on the contrary, because the Spanish leadership thought that time was ripe to convince a weary Great Britain, tired of Spanish pressures. On the 18th of May, Spain launched a proposal about Gibraltar. A day after, the Spanish diary *ABC* wrote:

“The whole of Spain is following with great attention the negotiations on Gibraltar that began yesterday in the Foreign Office between Michael Stewart and Fernando Castiella, British and Spanish foreign ministers.”³

The newspaper published the text under the suggestive title *The Hour of Gibraltar*, together with the photo of the two politicians on its cover page.

The most important points of the proposal could be summarized as follows: cession of Gibraltar to Spain; continued British military presence in the territory – British military base – formalized by a bilateral British–Spanish agreement, and special status granted to Gibraltar by the Spanish government under international guarantees.⁴ The special status included freedom of speech and assembly – liberties that were non-existing at that time in Spain – and also a certain degree of local government, a condition that the Catalans or the Basque would have loved to possess. Whether the intentions of Francoist Spain with respect to these latter points were serious, we will never come to know, as Great Britain rejected the Spanish ideas. Disillusioned, Spain introduced further punitive actions: for example, it started to restrict air traffic to Gibraltar from July, 1966; banned the crossing of female labour force the following month, and no longer accepted Gibraltarian documents from November. Vehicle traffic had been banned a month before.

² Magyar Országos Levéltár [MOL, Hungarian National Archive] XIX-J-1-j TÜK iratok, Anglia, 1968, 11. doboz, 14d/00779/1969, A Gibraltár körül folyó brit–spanyol vita. Írta Incze Jenő londoni nagykövet, London, 1969.01.15. [The British–Spanish Debate with respect to Gibraltar. Author: Jenő Incze, Hungarian ambassador in London, London, 15.01.1969.], no page numbers.

³ La hora de Gibraltar, *ABC*, 19.05.1966, p.1.

⁴ Hills, George: *Rock of Contention. A History of Gibraltar* (Robert Hale Co., London, 1974), p. 456.

ABC published a photo on its cover page titled *The Iron Curtain of Gibraltar*. The caption was the following: "When Winston Churchill invented the denomination Iron Curtain, he forgot to name another dividing line – just as shameful as the first one – that separates Spain from a Spanish territory. [...] Until when?"⁵ Six days later the question of Gibraltar returned to the cover page of ABC. *Frontier closing at Gibraltar* was the latest news. "Grid, lock and padlock. Since Monday midnight, Spain has been closed off a territory that is completely Spanish: Gibraltar. Our land..."⁶

If we only read ABC, we might as well think it was Great Britain that closed the border. Spaniards are portrayed as victims and the British as aggressors, not only in this particular case, but in general. In less than three weeks (November, 1966) ABC published an article under the telling title *Gibraltar, the focus of aggression*. "The violation of Spanish air space has become a custom of British military aviation",⁷ lamented the daily.

In the meantime, the Gibraltarian question was raised again in the UN. The General Assembly passed a new resolution on the 20th of December. It "calls upon the two parties to continue their negotiations, taking into account the interests of the people of the Territory, and asks the administering Power to expedite, without any hindrance, and in consultation with the Government of Spain, the decolonization of Gibraltar".⁸ Both Britain and Spain interpreted this latter part as their own victory, and curiously enough, both voted in favour of the resolution, which was finally accepted by 101 votes to nil.

1967

According to Great Britain, the interests of the Gibraltarians were equal to their wishes, that is, what they wanted to do in the future. In order to find this out, it called for a referendum. Britain made public its decision on the 14th of June, 1967 and the voting was to be held on the 10th of September the same year. The British government requested UN observers but the organisation refused to send them. What is more, the C-24 publicly opposed the whole point of the referendum.

The position of ABC was optimistic. It published a cover page with a photo of Spaniards watching the Rock. The title was not new, it had already been used for another cover page a year before: *The Hour of Gibraltar*. Only a week before the proposed referendum, the Spanish daily wrote: "The silhouette of the Rock has again come into sight due to the [...] decolonisation programme of the United Nations. From the peace of the summer, Spaniards contemplate the diplomatic manoeuvres in the conviction that Gibraltar is the ripe fruit and one day it shall fall."⁹

⁵ La alabrera de Gibraltar, ABC, 20.10.1966, p.1.

⁶ Cierre de la frontera con Gibraltar, ABC, 26.10.1966, p.1.

⁷ Gibraltar, foco de agresión, ABC, 13.11.1966, p. 65.

⁸ Resolutions adopted by the General Assembly during its 21st session, Question of Gibraltar, 20.12.1966, RES/2231, XXI, Available at the United Nations website, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/005/34/IMG/NR000534.pdf?OpenElement>, downloaded: 10.01.2012

⁹ La hora de Gibraltar, ABC, 25.08.1967, p.1.

Despite UN and Spanish protests, the referendum took place on the given date. Two options were presented to the Gibraltarians:

“(a) to pass under Spanish sovereignty in accordance with the terms proposed by the Spanish government to Her Majesty’s government on the 18th of May, 1966; or

(b) voluntarily retain their link with Britain, with democratic local institutions and with Britain retaining its present responsibilities.”¹⁰

The two possibilities were not equally balanced. First, very positive concepts were characteristic of the second option: democracy, local institutions and a responsible mother country. Moreover, the British option was further helped by the fact that people tend to prefer status quo, that is, conditions that they already know, which means that the desire for security tends to win over the choice for a change.¹¹ Apart from that, option (a) was not duly explained, as few people would know what exactly the Spanish government proposed more than a year before the referendum. All these above-mentioned factors contributed to the British victory but were not the main reason. The *real* cause was the general wish of the locals to stay with Britain.

The turnout and the result were more than overwhelming. Out of 12,762 Gibraltarians eligible to vote, 12,182 did so, that is 95.46%. Of these, 12,138 voted in favour of Britain, reflecting a 99.6% of all Gibraltarians who casted their vote.¹²

The UN Assembly condemned the referendum by declaring it to be opposed to previous UN resolutions. Nonetheless, over the course of years, the 1967 voting has converted into something to celebrate, and its anniversaries started to be commemorated by the Gibraltarians as National Days. Naturally, the Spanish point of view of the referendum and the National Day of Gibraltar are quite different. *El País (Andalucía)* has recently stated in a tone not lacking certain contempt: “the citizens of the only existing colony in Europe, celebrate the so-called National Day”.¹³

1969

The year 1968 passed by under apparent calmness. British–Gibraltarian negotiations were going on. Their result, the new constitution of Gibraltar, introduced on the 30th of May, 1969, stirred waves of Spanish protest. The document begins as follows:

Whereas Gibraltar is part of Her Majesty’s dominions and Her Majesty’s Government have given assurances to the people of Gibraltar that Gibraltar will remain part of Her Majesty’s dominions unless and until an Act of Parliament otherwise provides, and furthermore that Her Majesty’s Government will never enter into arrangements under

¹⁰ 1967 – The Referendum, in: Gibraltar. The unofficial homepage. Available at <http://www.gibnet.com/library/refl.htm>, downloaded: 10.10.2012.

¹¹ Idea of the Mexican writer, Juan Villaloro, expressed with respect to the 2012 Mexican elections.

¹² MOL, Incze, *ibid*, 1969.

¹³ Un ‘National Day’ más crispado, *El País. Edición Andalucía*, 09.09.2012. Available at http://ccaa.elpais.com/ccaa/2012/09/09/andalucia/1347219038_355857.html, downloaded: 04.01.2013.

which the people of Gibraltar would pass under the sovereignty of another state against their freely and democratically expressed wishes.¹⁴

One knot of problem was the 'wishes of the people', that Spanish foreign policy considered as irrelevant with respect to the points of the Treaty of Utrecht and regarded it as a backdoor that the British used to evade decolonising the territory. The constitution does not talk about a colony, it does not even mention that word. Gibraltar is referred to as a dominion. Thus, apparently, the question of decolonisation was resolved. Spain was not happy with this kind of 'pseudo' solution, although it has to be underlined that its behaviour in Western Sahara was very much alike.¹⁵ Upset with the British steps, the Spanish leadership resorted to further punitive action: ferry service was suspended in June, and following the expiry of the deadline – 1st of October, 1969 – provided by the 2429 (XXIII) UN resolution of the 18th of December of 1968, to decolonize Gibraltar,¹⁶ Spain also cut telephone lines. The isolation of Gibraltar was completed by the 24th of October, 1969 when the overall closure of the border was ordered. Gibraltar remained cut off from the mainland for more than a decade.

The border was finally opened in December 1982, but only for people crossing on foot. The circulation of cars and goods have been allowed since February, 1985 when the complete reopening of the frontier took place. The *ABC* commented the events as follows on its cover page: *In exchange for nothing*. Extracts from the text: "The Spanish government made the fence of Gibraltar wide open, notwithstanding that Great Britain is not likely to be willing to offer anything in return."¹⁷

We can consider the 1960's as a rather conflictive period in British-Spanish relations, and the year of 1969 was one of the nadirs. Therefore, the British Foreign Office probably felt very much relieved when Fernando Maria Castiella y Maíz,¹⁸ who had held the position of foreign minister since 1957, and was one of the key figures of Spanish foreign policy, left office. One could have thought that it might have been easier to negotiate with his successor and even more so with the democratic governments following the death of Franco, but there was no breakthrough in the seventies, in the eighties or in the nineties. Not even at the beginning of the 21st century.

¹⁴ Gibraltar Constitution Order 1969, in: Gibraltar, the unofficial homepage, http://www.gibnet.com/library/gib_con.pdf, downloaded: 29.12.2012.

¹⁵ Spain "resolved" the colonial question by changing the status of the territory from colony to dominium.

¹⁶ Available at the United Nations website, A/RES/2429, XXIII, 18.12.1968, [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/2429\(XXIII\)&Lang=E&Area=RESOLUTION](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/2429(XXIII)&Lang=E&Area=RESOLUTION), downloaded: 03.01.2012.

¹⁷ A cambio de nada, *ABC*, 05.02.1985, p.1.

¹⁸ (1907–1976). Lawyer, university teacher, diplomat and politician. Marcelino Oreja Aguirre and Rafael Sanchez Mantero have recently published a book on his activities: *Entre la Historia y la Memoria, Fernando Maria Castiella y la Política Exterior de España (1957-1969)*.

Nowadays

The Spanish point of view has not changed with the democratic transition.

Spaniards of all times and of all political ideologies, independently of the current political regime, have constantly vindicated the national sovereignty over Gibraltar. Yesterday, 16 years after the closure, a Spanish mission [...] crossed the fence, in an act full of symbolism, towards achieving the unrenounceable rights of Spain.¹⁹

Gibraltar, the open wound in the history of Spain.²⁰

Prince Edward begins today his “unfortunate visit” to Gibraltar.²¹

Spain protests against the British royal visit to Gibraltar.²²

Nexus between Spain and Great Britain has always become chillier in the time of royal visits to the Rock. This was the case when Queen Elisabeth arrived in the territory during her coronation tour in 1954, also when Prince Charles and Lady Diana started their honeymoon in Gibraltar at the beginning of the 1980’s, and every time when Princess Anne, daughter of the British Queen, or Prince Edward, her younger son, visited Gibraltar (2003, 2009 and 2001, respectively). The latest visit was paid by Prince Edward and his wife in 2012. Their presence occurred at a time of Spanish–Gibraltarian tensions due to fishing rights. *Gibraltar. Spain warns that it will not put up with more humiliations*, stated the *ABC* cover.²³

The Spanish foreign minister convoked the British Ambassador to Spain and expressed his discomfort and uneasiness. In fact, we can say that it has become a kind of “tradition” of the Spanish foreign leadership to protest, for they did so on every single visit. This time the occasion of the visit was the diamond jubilee of Queen Elisabeth II. During the festivities, the portrait of the Queen was projected onto the Rock, which many Spaniards did not like, and there was also criticism because the projection could not actually be seen from the Gibraltarian side, but very clearly from the Spanish mainland. So it might be considered as a kind of British message. The Spanish royal family was so upset with the visit of Prince Edward, that Queen Sofia cancelled her visit to England, thus she was not present at the anniversary ceremony of the British Queen.

The British attitude has softened a little. It is reflected by the fact that the British leadership was ready to negotiate with Spain and that the two countries came close to an agreement over Gibraltar at the beginning of the 21st century. The idea of joint Spanish–British sovereignty was however rejected by the Gibraltarians themselves, in a referendum

¹⁹ Gibraltar, más cerca, *ABC*, 12.01.1985, p.1.

²⁰ Gibraltar, la herida abierta de la historia de España, *ABC*, 13.06.2012. Opinion of the historian and writer, Federico Sánchez Aguilar. Available at <http://www.abc.es/20120518/espana/abci-gibraltar-relaciones-espana-inglaterra-201205171640.html>, downloaded: 04.01.2013.

²¹ El Príncipe Eduardo empieza hoy su “desafortunada visita” a Gibraltar, *ABC*, 11.06.2012. Available at <http://www.abc.es/20120611/espana/abci-principe-eduardo-comienza-desafortunada-201206101958.html>, downloaded: 04.01.2013.

²² España protesta por la visita real británica a Gibraltar, *ABC*, 11.05.2012, p.1.

²³ Gibraltar. España advierte que no tolerará más humillaciones, *ABC*, 25.05.2012, p.1.

organized in 2002. There was an 87.92% turnout at the poll and 98.97% of the Gibraltarians voted against shared sovereignty.²⁴

An important factor in this shift of the British point of view with respect to Gibraltar, is the kind of embarrassment that British politicians might feel when their country is described as an anachronistic entity with colonial aspirations. To make things worse, it is not only the opinion of many Spanish but also of many Argentineans. There are various parallels between Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands [called *Islas Malvinas* in Latin America]. They are both small-sized overseas territories of Britain, that another country has been claiming as its own. Yet, the most conspicuous similarity is that of prestige. Their belonging is inseparable of national pride, thus the issues of Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands might unite and rally people behind or against politicians in all the countries in question. For example the renewal of the Argentinean claim to the Falkland Islands played an important role in the re-election of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner as President of Argentina in 2011. Almost 30 years before that, the British victory in the Falkland War (1982) had brought with itself an electoral triumph for Margaret Thatcher, while it had contributed to the fall of the military junta in Argentina.

There is another but up to now not very well-known link that connects the Falkland Islands to Gibraltar. Recently, *ABC* has published an article titled *The day when Thatcher feared a Spanish attack on Gibraltar*²⁵ in which we are told that the British leadership was afraid that Spain would take advantage of the engagement of British forces near the shores of Patagonia, and might try to take Gibraltar by force. It seems, though, that those who were preparing armed action in Gibraltar were not the Spanish, but the Argentinean junta who sent a group of saboteurs to Europe, with the idea of blowing something up, possibly a British ship. The plan could not materialize, because the Spanish police intercepted the agents.²⁶

The pressure of those who think that the above-mentioned territories are worth neither the costs nor the possible risks, is increasing in Britain. According to them, instead of objects of national pride, the Falklands and Gibraltar might rather be considered as causes of a bad image for Britain and strained international relations.

Nowadays, besides Spanish and British attitudes, we need to include *the Gibraltarian* point of view. For a long time people living in the area were not considered among the decision makers. However, ideas have changed, and there is also an emerging Gibraltarian identity – stemming in a great part from disenchantment with Spain, and up to a certain extent, with Britain – that demands that the interest of the locals should (first) be taken into account, and assumes that this interest might be different from that of Spain and also that of Britain. Fabian Picardo, chief minister of Gibraltar expressed on occasion of the 2012

²⁴ El 98.97% de los gibraltareños vota contra la soberanía compartida, *ABC*, 08.11.2002. Available at http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-08-11-2002/abc/Nacional/el-9897-por-ciento-de-los-gibraltareños-vota-contra-la-soberanía-compartida_142283.html, downloaded: 04.01.2013.

²⁵ El día cuando Thatcher temió un ataque de España en Gibraltar, *ABC*, 29.12.2012. Available at <http://www.abc.es/espana/20121229/abci-thatcher-gibraltar-201212281821.html>, downloaded: 04.01.2013.

²⁶ La seguridad española desbarató un intento de sabotaje argentino contra Gibraltar en plena guerra de las Malvinas, *El País*, 10.10.1983. Available at http://elpais.com/diario/1983/10/10/espana/434588408_850215.html, downloaded: 04.01.2013.

National Day that “we are in our home, on our Rock, in our country”.²⁷ The emergence of small-sized states in Europe as well as the strengthening of nationalist/separatist movements for example in Catalonia and in Scotland, might serve as an inspiration for the tiny Gibraltar. Trying to be independent with 6.8 km² and less than 30,000 inhabitants, might seem boldness, but Gibraltarian leadership is making some spectacular steps. For the first time Gibraltar has competed as a country in an international sporting event, the World Short Court [Swimming] Championship in Istanbul.²⁸ The push for complete sovereignty could be genuine, but even if it is not, it can be politically useful as it is likely to increase the weight the Gibraltarians might have in any potential future arrangement over the Rock. And the year 2013 – the 300 anniversary of the Treaty of Utrecht – would surely not be uneventful with respect to Gibraltar.

²⁷ Gibraltar amenaza al gobierno español con “un conflicto internacional”, *El País*, 10.09.2012. Available at http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2012/09/10/actualidad/1347294062_512018.html, downloaded: 10.01.2013.

²⁸ Gibraltar luce bandera en la piscina, *ABC*, 14.12.2012. Available at <http://www.abc.es/deportes/20121214/abci-gibraltar-seleccion-natacion-201212140938.html>, downloaded: 04.01.2013.