



By Fernando Krahn



The Writing on the Rock

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THE ANGLO-SPANISH conference in progress here to discuss the future of the Rock of Gibraltar is more than a mere postscript to the story of a classic fortress and symbol of power. It is one of the most important diplomatic negotiations ever conducted between the two nations, being as much a discussion of their respective destinies and influence and advantages in a changing Europe as about the Rock itself. There is a real danger of a complete breakdown in Anglo-Spanish relations if these talks fail. This would have a serious impact not only upon Spain and Britain and their precarious economies but upon the rest of Europe and the western alliance as well.

Behind the whole question lies the restless, dissident mood now prevailing through most of Europe, of which President de Gaulle's defection from NATO is one manifestation. A new shape is emerging, and there is an undercurrent of excitement about it. No one knows exactly what the new shape will be, but it is becoming increasingly clear that Spain, encouraged by France, will play a stronger and more competitive role in it. Britain's future is far less assured. An acute apprehension of the changing pattern of Europe, with a sense of being caught in a chronically unequal struggle for a competitive role on the Continent, is now guiding Britain's policy and forcing it to reconsider some long-cherished concepts.

Gibraltar has assumed immediate importance for Spain for several reasons. First of all, it provides an emotive distraction from serious

domestic problems in a country now racing with considerable success to catch up with the century. Secondly, General Franco's intimations of mortality increase his desire to retrieve the Rock as a nonpartisan memorial to the nation. But more important than either of those considerations, the struggle to regain Gibraltar reflects Spain's intention to drive a hard bargain with a Europe and a western alliance that have coldly and unreservedly rejected it for the past twenty-five years but no longer can afford to do so.

Industrial expansion and the rapid rise of living standards have made Spain the Continent's most promising new export market and investment opportunity. The competition is fierce. This situation has given Spain a sudden and powerful leverage of which it has taken prompt advantage. For the first time in a very long while, Spain is acting with verve and ebullience in the mainstream of international diplomacy instead of standing by, defensively truculent.

DE GAULLE regards Spain as a strong potential ally for what he wishes to achieve in Europe and is pursuing an assiduous courtship, championing an associate membership for Spain in the Common Market despite the cool responses of Belgium, Holland, and Italy. West Germany, with its own considerable financial stake in Spain, seems to be favorable, and in some circles Spain's chances are considered equal to or even better than Britain's. Spain at least is not equivocal about its desire to be in.

When West German Foreign Minister Gerhard Schröder recently visited Madrid, his Spanish counterpart, Fernando María Castiella, clearly indicated that Spain was no longer satisfied to be taken for granted; outstanding disputes with its European neighbors must be settled. There was no doubt about what he meant, nor about where he hoped pressure might be applied. The same line has been taken with Washington. Now that the United States has lost its French bases, it wants stronger assurance of its Spanish ones. Apparently Washington has been bluntly advised that putting the diplomatic screws on Britain about Gibraltar is the best way of getting such assurance.

Gibraltar has thus become a crucial pawn in several European power plays for reasons which no one anticipated and which have nothing whatsoever to do with its original strategic value. Militarily, the Rock is as dead as the dodo and nobody pretends otherwise. What started as an exasperating but confined squabbling point between the Continent's two principal outsiders has enlarged to something that threatens to affect the balance of the new Europe. For Britain and Spain to engage in recriminations, sanctions, and, not inconceivably, force against one another is an altogether intolerable concept. First, it would push Spain closer to France and de Gaulle's policies, and would seriously affect both Britain's and Spain's positions with the Common Market. In addition, a confrontation with Spain would be a serious financial burden for Britain, which can scarcely afford even the minimal garrison it maintains in Gibraltar at present. And Britain's commitments elsewhere, possibly including West Germany, would be affected, further weakening the West.

Both Britain and Spain have made it abundantly clear that they do not want the thing to go too far. But they stand deadlocked on honorable points of principle that would seem to make collision inevitable—Spain's that Gibraltar is Spanish territorially and historically; Britain's that the sovereignty of the twenty-five thousand native Gibraltarians is not negotiable. On these points both sides have spoken