



A través del Telón de Acero: Historia de las relaciones políticas entre España y la RDA (1973–1990)

Xavier María Ramos Diez-Astrain, (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, M° de la Presidencia, 2021), 331 pp.

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BOOK REVIEW

Xavier María Ramos Diez-Astrain, *A través del Telón de Acero: Historia de las relaciones políticas entre España y la RDA (1973–1990)* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, M° de la Presidencia, 2021), 331 pp.

Between October and December 1976, an exhibition entitled ‘Ya es hora. Es ist Zeit’, was held at the then brand-new Palace of the Republic in East Berlin, also home to East Germany’s parliament. The exhibition drew on the works of East German and Spanish artists and writers, some of them exiled to East Germany, in support, it said, of change in Spain and ‘freedom and democracy in countries of the imperialist world’. The exhibition is an example of the interest with which leaders and intellectuals of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) followed Spanish cultural and political developments – the subject of *A través del Telón de Acero: Historia de las relaciones políticas entre España y la RDA (1973–90)* by Xavier María Ramos Diez-Astrain. The book focuses on the period from the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries to the dissolution of East Germany.

Spanish and German academic literature on the Cold War has focused on relations between West Germany and Spain, especially during the early part of the Cold War. Studies on the connection between Spain and East Germany remain rare, and it is here that Ramos Diez-Astrain’s book offers its most significant contribution. As the author points out, during the early Cold War both Spain and East Germany were pariah states in Western eyes, the GDR perhaps more so because the West did not recognise its very existence. Overall, the author shows that in the late 1970s and 1980s, the GDR courted Spain’s favour much more purposefully than the other way around.

The book is made up of a short introduction and seven chapters. Chapter 1 briefly describes Spain-GDR relations until 1973, highlighting the Dresden Philharmonie’s tour of Spain in May 1957, which the author tells us was the first time that an important musical ensemble from a Warsaw Pact country toured Western Europe; and the trade treaty of 1961, which was in fact just an inter-bank agreement. Chapter 2 explores how, from 1973 onwards, Spain-GDR relations went from the most limited to the fullest relationship Spain had with any Warsaw Pact country. Indeed, at that time Spain had nothing more than commercial and consular agreements with the other members of the Warsaw Pact. Although the chapter covers the period up until Spain’s first free elections in 1977, we do not learn (except for a very brief mention) whether the GDR tried to influence the legalisation of the Communist Party in Spain in April 1977, nor how East Berlin received that development.

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 explore the interaction between the GDR and a democratising Spain until the Spanish Socialist Party’s victory in 1982. Then, the GDR was not a priority for Spain. The author reports that Spain frequently exchanged verbal niceties with the GDR, but this led to few meaningful diplomatic activities. For instance, a proposed meeting between the Spanish and GDR foreign ministers never happened (p. 130). There is little here, however, on the connection between the GDR and Spanish parties of the Left. In other words, one wonders whether there was a GDR equivalent of the support the Socialist Democratic Party’s Ebert Foundation provided to the Spanish Socialist Party or what the Christian Socialist Union’s Hanns Seidel Foundation offered Alianza Popular. The author also mentions interesting fragments about espionage activities in the two countries, such as naming some of the East German spies operating in Madrid (p. 132) and noting that the Soviet Union acquired

information about Spain via the GDR on several occasions. However, he does not develop the theme of Soviet and East German espionage in Spain more broadly.

Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 explore the period between 1982 and 1988. This continues the chronological trajectory of the book, but it has the unfortunate side effect that many thematic elements are repeated, and bilateral and multilateral issues are not clearly distinguished. Overall, the monograph comes across as a modestly revised doctoral thesis. Following a less awkward structure for the book would have helped avoid unnecessary repetitions, made other connections visible, and explored them more deeply. For instance, Spain's 1986 in-out North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) referendum (the first and last time a member of the Atlantic Alliance would put its continued membership to a vote) and the 1983 town-twinning agreement between Madrid and East Berlin are mentioned only in passing in the chapter on bilateral ties (p. 188 and p. 225). They are both critical matters that would have deserved further research and a more extended discussion.


The author tells us that, while Spain may have exchanged ambassadors with the GDR earlier than with any other Warsaw Pact state, it would take much longer for a GDR head of state to visit. Indeed, Erich Honecker came to Spain only in 1988, while Romania's Nicolae Ceaușescu had already visited in 1979. Moreover, the Spanish prime minister, king and queen never officially toured East Germany. This insightful point might encourage scholars to reflect more deeply on how best to measure the quality of engagement between countries.

The last chapter is on the dissolution of East Germany from a Spanish perspective – an important topic, as Spain was the first European Economic Community (EEC) and NATO country to support German reunification. However, it has yet to be adequately explored and integrated into the literature on the end of the Cold War. While the chapter does not provide great insights, it points in the right direction.

Another of the book's contributions is that most of its sources are newly consulted East German archival materials, with some references to Spanish documents. However, more direct quotes from the documents would have been helpful to give colour and meaning to the sometimes tedious recounting of meetings between mid-ranking Spanish and East German representatives. In addition, and staying within the linguistic range of the archival research for the book, it would have been useful to look at West German materials. For example, how did Bonn react to exchanges between Madrid and East Berlin?

Although the book has several shortcomings, it is a relevant example of a Spain-based scholar undertaking valuable multilingual, archival-based research on the late Cold War – something that was done all too rarely until very recently. Moreover, the book is a helpful reminder that the histories of the late Cold War in Europe still need decentring from the core Western European countries, and that much remains to be written.

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