

Florentino Rodao

Franco y el imperio japonés. Imágenes y propaganda en tiempos de guerra (Barcelona, Plaza & Janés, 2002) 669 pp.

In the back cover of Florentino Rodao's book, a cartoon originally published in the Philippines in 1941 by the leftist magazine *Democracia* depicts general Tojo, surrounded by Adolf Hitler, Mussolini and Franco ("The Axis Gang"), taking an Ace of Spades from a pack of cards; the card carries the following legend: "the job of taking care of America". Drops of sweat fall from Tojo's forehead, while the other Latin dictators face the Japanese prime minister with a malicious smile and Hitler, with a cynical look, pretends to comfort him. The cartoon takes us back to the apogee of the Axis alliance, a little before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, in December 1941, and after Hitler's armies launched a massive attack against the Soviet Union. It was also the time when Franco's Spain maintained the position of "non belligerent", an ambiguous statute that was generally viewed by the democratic powers as an ante-chamber to a pro-Axis belligerency.

While the Spanish-German or Spanish-Italian relations in the period ranging from 1936 to 1945 are already well studied, the relations between Franco's Spain and

the Japanese Empire were up to now practically ignored. Therefore, Florentino Rodao's book is an important contribution to the history of Spain's foreign relations and also to the general history of World War II. Well written, meticulously researched, using a vast bibliography and a sophisticated theoretical framework, *Franco y el imperio japonés* is a fine example of the current vitality of Spanish contemporary historiography.

One of the merits of Florentino Rodao's book is that it doesn't limit itself to the reconstitution of the diplomatic contacts between the two countries. Its approach is at the same time more embracing and more profound – it aims at placing the Spanish-Japanese relations in a long-term perspective and tries to investigate the way through which images, prejudices and stereotypes influenced the decision-making process in both countries, and were themselves manipulated by the policymakers when they wanted to achieve certain goals.

According to Rodao, a good deal of the observations, accounts and narratives produced by Spanish travellers, diplomats and writers about Japan relied on a basic ontological distinction between East and West, and in that manner helped to crystallise images which stressed the exotic and alien character of Japanese society and culture. As the author points out: "the orientalist perceptions were determinant in the

contacts between the two countries: Franco's Spain observed the Japanese as such [as Orientals], before seeing them as friends or foes" (p. 35, my translation). Hence, although Japan did arouse some curiosity and even admiration in certain Spanish circles, these rarely managed to break with the cognitive schemes that postulated the West intrinsic superiority over the East. In this respect, the way through which Spain observed and interpreted Japan's rise as a great industrial and military power after the Meiji restoration (1868) is quite instructive. Up to the mid-nineteenth century, and notwithstanding Spain's colonial presence in the Far East (Philippines, Micronesia), the prevailing tendency was to associate the Far Eastern peoples with the Chinese and to compare every Asiatic nation with China, a chaotic and poorly governed country that was an easy prey to Western imperialism. Japan, by contrast, seemed to contradict the stagnation to which the Oriental peoples were apparently doomed and even the dogma of the Western superiority, so spectacular were its military and economical achievements and so rapid was the pace of its social modernisation. At the close of the nineteenth century, when Spain was suddenly deprived of some of the last remnants of its overseas empire (Cuba, Philippines and Micronesia), and gradually sank into an identity crisis regarding its world role, Japan was emerging as

the "Prussia of the East", firstly with its military intervention in China (1884-85), and then with its remarkable naval victory over tsarist Russia in 1904-05 (a feat that became an object of study in the military academies of the Western world). The rise of Japan caused perplexity, but soon the cognitive schemes of the imperial mindset came up with a reassuring explanation: Japan triumphed because of its own westernization. Its success was explained by the assimilation of Western concepts, models and techniques and not by any sort of endogenous creative "genius". Hence, all the qualities that might somehow be ascribed to Japan had their negative side: its national achievements were due to the emulation of external models; its warrior code was linked with an appetite for aggressive expansion; and its artistic refinement went hand in hand with manifestations of cruelty and truculence.

Since Spain had not many reasons to feel threatened by Japan's ascendancy, the negative aspects of all these images and stereotypes were kept latent for a long time. In fact, Rodao quotes several positive remarks made in Spain about Japan in the years that preceded the Great War. In the first decade of the twentieth century, one could even hear people arguing for the "japanisation" of Spain as a way to catch up with the modern, industrialised nations of the West. A relatively small country, Japan had managed to mobilise its

society to the goal of national advancement, and this was a seductive example for those sectors of the Spanish elites who felt traumatised with the loss of empire and with the growing assertiveness of the regional nationalisms and of the working class movement. However, Rodao notes that this fascination with Japan, typical of societies stuck between modernity and tradition, such as the Spanish, the Portuguese or the Ottoman, was essentially a "reflex of its national frustrations, more conducive to comparisons than to learning" (p. 63). To understand why this was so one has to keep in mind that the contacts between the two countries were very scarce.

In the aftermath of its defeat in the Philippines in 1898, Spain undertook an extensive revision of its foreign policy priorities, and as a result of this revision its presence in the Far East was placed at the bottom of the list (Madrid even considered shutting down its legation in Beijing or in Tokyo, so great was its indifference towards Asia). Up to the 1930s, Spanish foreign policy oscillated between several goals and initiatives: the reestablishment of Spanish influence in Latin America, the propagation of Catholicism, a deeper involvement in European affairs, the revival of imperial ambitions. None of these options favoured an increment of the political, economic or cultural ties with Japan, with the possible exception of the second goal, which was directly

linked with the activities of Spanish missionaries in the Far East. Deprived of any significant material or geopolitical interest, it would be difficult for the Spanish-Japanese relations to move beyond the diplomatic routine or the exchange of courtesies.

However, with the Second World War new opportunities were created for the strengthening of the ties between Madrid and Tokyo. In the early stages of the war Francoist Spain and Imperial Japan shared the same allies, the same enemies and their goals and perspectives didn't conflict with each other. The crucial support given by Germany and Italy to Franco during the Civil War stimulated a pro-Fascist transformation of the Spanish regime, which would become have a diplomatic dimension in Spain's adhesion to the Anti-Commintern Pact of the two totalitarian powers plus Japan, in April 1939. On top of that, the hostility towards liberalism and parliamentary principles that characterised the Francoist regime was matched by certain nationalist aspirations which placed Spain in a collision route with the democratic powers, namely Great Britain (the question of Gibraltar) and France (rivalries in Morocco), two of the main rivals of Japan in the Far East.

Although circumstances forced him to act prudently (Spain's economic dependence towards Great Britain and France, the naval blockade imposed by Britain on the

Iberian Peninsula), Franco gradually aligned his foreign policy with the Axis powers and, after the fall of France in June 1940, nourished hopes of grabbing a slice of France's colonial empire in Northern Africa. With the signing of the "secret Protocol" at Hendaya, in September 1940, Spain practically joined the Tripartite pact and, together with Japan, constituted itself as a reserve of the Axis for a further escalation of the war.

The image of Japan in Spain inevitably reflected the new political and ideological complicity between the two governments. During a short period of time, Japan ceased to be viewed as an "Asiatic" nation and soon became idealised as the counterpoint of all the negative aspects associated with the Orient. While the other Asiatic races were depicted as weak, primitive, underdeveloped, the Japanese were systematically presented as an assertive, disciplined, highly organised, and military adroit nation – virtues that were especially prized in Franco's regime (in 1941, for instance, the famous book on the Japanese military code, *Bushido. The Soul of Japan*, by Nitobe Inazo, was re-issued in Spain with a preface by Millan Astray, the founder of the Spanish Foreign Legion). It was, however, an infatuation that tended to diminish after Japan failed to join Germany's assault against the Soviet Union in June 1941. From that moment on, as Rodao points out, "Japan no longer

was an ally against Moscow, and its image lost an important asset, anti-communism" (p. 159). And without that ideological cement, the friendship between the two countries would be at the mercy of the fortunes of war and of the internal oscillations in the Francoist regime. This last aspect needs to be emphasised since the definition of Spain's foreign policy was very much connected to the power struggle in Madrid between the radical wing of the *Falange* and the other elements of the coalition that backed Franco's regime (right-wing conservatives, Catholics, monarchists). The former fervently supported a victory of the Axis, which would pave the way to a complete Fascist transformation of the regime, while the latter, notwithstanding their anticommunism and aversion towards democracy, feared that an Axis triumph would provoke a too drastic change in the domestic and international status quo, with unpredictable consequences for their own interests.

The Falangists got the upper hand until 1942. Their leader, Ramon Serrano Suñer, Franco's brother-in-law and minister for Foreign Affairs between 1940 and 1942, sensed that he could explore Japan's military triumphs to further his goals, and lost no time in giving a pro-Japan bias to Spanish diplomacy and propaganda. Although he never expressed any sort of interest and sympathy towards Japan, Franco must have thought that the prospect

of regaining some influence in the Far East thanks to this new friendship (namely in the Philippines) was something that justified the risk of incurring the wrath of the United States.

Suñer's pro-Japanese policy turned out to be a complete fiasco for three main reasons. In the first place, the friendship with Japan endangered Spanish relations with Portugal and the Holy See (on account of the Japanese occupation of East Timor in February 1942, and the ill treatment suffered by the Catholic clergy at the hands of the Japanese in several territories); secondly, it created a friction with the Latin American republics (which had aligned themselves with the United States after the Rio Conference in January 1942); and finally, it compromised the chances of a rapprochement towards the Allied powers (from whom Spain was still heavily dependent in terms of food, fuel and other crucial supplies). Furthermore, the brutality of Japanese military rule in the Far East soon showed how naïf were the expectations of a resurgence of Spanish influence in that part of the world (in the Philippines, for instance, the Japanese lost no time in proclaiming that the islands needed to discard "three hundred years of Convent" as well as of "forty years of Hollywood"...).

The honeymoon between Madrid and Tokyo came to an end in 1942 and this was due to developments

occurred both in Spain and in the international arena. In September, after a cabinet reshuffle that put an end to the *Falange* primacy, Spain initiated a gradual reorientation of its foreign policy that would take her back to a position of effective neutrality, a decision made inevitable by the Allied landing in Northern Africa ("Operation Torch"). The new foreign minister, Count Jordana, a conservative officer of monarchical leanings, followed the example of Serrano Suñer when he treated the relationship with Japan as a means to an end, but he did it in order to promote a rapprochement towards the Allies and other friendly states (Portugal and the Holy See), and to consolidate the domestic ascendancy of the conservatives. To achieve this goal, Jordana took small but firm steps, such as the withdrawing of official support to the intelligence network that some of Suñer's protégées had set up in Allied countries to gather information for the Japanese authorities. In addition, the propaganda organs and the newspapers supervised by the regime were encouraged to allude to the "barbaric" conduct of the Japanese army in the Far East and to expose the "hypocrisy" of the non-aggression pact between Tokyo and Stalin's Russia. The negative images and stereotypes of Japan emerged in full force. The Japanese were now depicted as a cruel, savage, and uncivilised nation, incapable of assimilating the values and norms of

Western civilisation. Curiously, the same phenomenon didn't occur with the Germans or the Italians, who were never treated in such overtly simplistic terms. According to Rodao, this can be explained by the persistence of the old perceptions about the Orientals that had been put to rest in regard to Japan, but that could be awakened when the people who controlled the flow of information and the manipulation of images suddenly discovered an interest in the vilification of Japan.

When Spain finally decided that the time had come to abandon its "non-belligerency" and formally return to "neutrality", in September 1943, its authorities were careful enough to prepare that change of policy with a neutralist discourse on the war in Europe and a strong pro-Allied rhetoric on the Pacific war. To impress the US ambassador, Franco even went to the point of articulating a new theory that explained Spain's conduct in the war. According to the *Caudillo*, the World War was not a unified conflict but a threefold one. There was a war in Western Europe, in the face of which Spain remained neutral (but with a certain leaning towards the Allies); a war in Eastern Europe between Germany and the Soviet Union, which Spain followed with "attention" because of the consequences that might befall on Europe if communism triumphed; and a war in the Pacific, in the face of which Spain remained

neutral while desiring an Allied victory over Japan.

Basically, Franco was already thinking in terms of his regime's future in a post-war environment that would most likely be dominated by the Western democracies and the reviled Soviet Union. Consequently, he felt pressed to show some pro-Allied credentials, and the bashing of Japan was a relatively simple way to do it. The withdrawing of the German divisions stationed at the French Pyrenees in mid-1944 created a propitious climate to the stiffening of the propaganda rhetoric against Japan, which became evident in the official circulars issued to the newspapers instructing them to follow an "openly favourable bias towards the USA in the Pacific war against Japan", and to stress whenever possible the "anti-Christian" and "anti-Western" stamp of Japan's policies (p. 462).

As the war neared its end, and Madrid's isolation grew day after day, the survival of the regime became the top priority of Franco's foreign policy. Since it would be difficult for the regime to distance itself from Nazi Germany after several years of intimate relations, Japan provided a suitable vehicle for Franco to ingratiate himself with the Allies. The Manila Massacre (March 1945) gave him the pretext to renounce the diplomatic representation of Japanese interests in the American states and to sever diplomatic relations with Tokyo. The next

step would be to declare war on Japan – a gesture that the Spanish authorities thought might secure them a place at the San Francisco Conference. But this was not to be. When the Allied governments and public opinion became aware of that possibility they were shocked by its blatant opportunism, and quickly warned Franco's government that they saw no interest whatsoever in that initiative.

So what did Franco gain with his policy of outright hostility towards Japan in the final months of the war? According to Florentino Rodao, not much. In fact, "Madrid failed to come near the victors or to obtain a sympathetic reaction from world opinion, or even to gain the sympathy of the Allies in regard to the Spanish distress at Manila. And Spain was not invited to attend the San Francisco Conference (...)" (p. 515). What eventually saved Franco and his regime in the aftermath of the conflict were the profound divergences among the Allies when they began to discuss the fate of the Fascist "relics" in the post-war order. In a way, Franco was saved by the growing antagonism between the Western Powers and the Soviet Union, which was soon to materialise into the "Cold War". Incidentally, this latter conflict would also turn out to be immensely favourable for Japan as a country and for those sectors of its military and political elites that had engaged

themselves in the expansionist politics of the 1930's and 1940s.

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