

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ENVIRONMENTAL AS
COMPARED WITH HUMAN FACTORS IN
THE DECLINE OF IBERIA

BY

W. O. BLANCHARD

University of Illinois, Urbana

Weak Nations.—Spain and Portugal are the sick nations of western Europe. Judged by the usual criteria of material and intellectual achievement they fail to measure up to the standards of their neighbors. They are, indeed, more like outliers of eastern and southeastern Europe.

Former Importance.—Yet it has not always been so. There is evidence that shortly after the beginning of the Christian era there were, perhaps three times as many people living in Spain as are there now. Under the Moslems it became probably the most enlightened and highly civilized country of Europe. Cordoba and Zaragossa were then famous seats of learning with large libraries to which scholars flocked from all parts of the continent. Agriculture flourished under the stimulus of an elaborate irrigation system built by a people who had been bred in the desert. Likewise industry and trade prospered. "Cordovan leather" and "Toledo steel" were household terms, everywhere synonyms for superior quality. Even in the late sixteenth century both Spain and Portugal were counted among the world's foremost nations. They were in the vanguard of discovery, exploration, conquest, and settlement of the new lands, and the Spanish Empire was one of the largest ever gathered under a single flag. Yet today no one even by courtesy would rate either Spain or Portugal higher than third or fourth class nations.

The Problem.—Has there been an actual decline, or is it a case of stagnation which has allowed other countries to forge ahead? Wherein lies the responsibility for this tremendous change?

Important Factors.—Of the various factors which have strongly influenced the development of Iberia the more important can be grouped under four general heads. They are (1) climate, (2) topography, (3) natural resources, and (4) people.

The Climate.—There is no doubt but that the climate of Spain is a trying one. Especially is its adverse influence felt in the deficiency of moisture. Approximately two-thirds of the peninsula is too dry

for ordinary cultivated annuals, and large areas can be best used only for pasturage, for dry farming, or for drought-resistant crops. This is a serious handicap for a country so predominantly agricultural.

Topography.—Topography also adds serious restrictions to both agriculture and transportation. About four-fifths of the peninsula is made up of the meseta, an old plateau block, averaging almost one-half mile in height. Its approaches are abrupt, and its surface is interrupted by deep gorges, and by mountain ridges. The rivers sunk deeply in the plateau are for the most part unsuited for navigation and of limited use for irrigation. No valley highway provides an easy route entirely across the peninsula in any direction. Furthermore, a regular coastline and the commercial isolation of the peninsula by the Pyrenees at the north and the Sahara at the south minimizes the possibility of through routes in any direction. Thus the population is concentrated mainly about the margins with wide stretches of sparsely inhabited broken country in the center. The problems of railway construction, maintenance and traffic, are difficult. France with about the same area, has three times the railway mileage with five times the railway tonnage, and in addition has 7,500 miles of navigable rivers and canals. In proportion to area, it is estimated that on the average to traverse the distance between two places in Spain requires a railway mileage twice the horizontal air line distance. Likewise the limitations upon agricultural development are almost as serious.

Aridity and rough topography have then, severely handicapped both agriculture and transportation. Yet rocky Italy with slightly less arable land supports about twice as many people as does Spain. Furthermore, only about half of the arid land of Spain capable of irrigation is at present being watered. Until recently the general system of farming in arid Spain has been to crop only one-third of the land each year, leaving two-thirds fallow to recuperate and to store the scanty rainfall. The Spanish peasant is said to "scratch his soil with a Roman plow" drawn by oxen. The sickle and scythe are common harvest tools. Almost every village has a threshing floor and 80 per cent of the threshing is still done by use of the flail or by treading out the grain by oxen or donkeys and then winnowing in the wind. Labor is cheap, unskilled in the use of machinery and generally inefficient. The use of fertilizers and agricultural machinery has been largely lacking.

With the coming of competition in the production of cheap grain from the New World, Denmark transformed its agriculture from grain growing to an animal industry. This latter not only provided higher priced products but furnished the fertilizers for the rehabilitation of a worn out soil. Spain's reaction to the same stimulus has taken the form

of high tariff walls on grain imports and she continues to grow wheat and barley with yields the smallest of any important country of Europe outside of Russia and the Balkans. Likewise she remains one of the lowest countries of Europe in animals per square mile or per capita.

One of the greatest single factors in retarding the economic and social development of the country is the poor land system. In the densely populated humid northwest, in certain sections, the land has been divided up to a fantastic degree and the price is most exorbitant. There are holdings whose total areas are 130 and 430 square yards made up of bits, 7, 5, and even $2\frac{1}{2}$ square yards each. These tiny patches are inevitably scattered, an owner possessing and farming 4 to 50 parcels. In the vicinity of Vigo isolated holdings of 35, 25, or even 12 square yards are common and 2 acres in one plot owned by one man is considered large.

But far more serious is the system of large holdings in the south, especially in Andalusia. In the province of Seville, for example, more than 2.5 million acres belong to the crown or nobility. More than 1,350,000 acres or 41 per cent of the entire Province is given over to pasturing fighting bulls, land much of which is capable of raising valuable cereal, fruit, or vegetable crops. One proprietor here owns 37,000 acres of arable land and in one municipality (Utrera) 30 individuals own an average of about 3,750 acres each, one of the farms embracing 62,500 acres, with several of 45,000 acres. It is not unusual to find, in districts containing more than 1,000 families living by farming, that 5 or 6 individuals own all of the land. Spain has about the same area as has Germany yet the latter has practically twice as many land owners.

In the absence of up-to-date figures on the size of holdings for all of Spain, we may take the average for the third of the country which has been recently reassessed. This shows that of the land owners paying a land tax, 82 per cent have daily incomes from that land of less than 1 peseta (16c), and must hire out as day laborers at low wages to eke out a living.¹ And this is in a country predominantly agricultural. As a consequence the great mass of peasants is steeped in misery and poverty² and the government has done little to remedy the evil.

Lag in Industry.—As in its agriculture so in its industrial development Spain has lagged. It possesses about the same amount of water power as does Italy, but has actually developed less than one-half as much. Besides, it possesses a considerable variety of mineral ores in-

¹ 847,548 owners out of a total of 1,026,412 covered in this survey.

² The per capita income in Spain in 1919 was estimated at \$54.00; in Italy, \$112.00 or more than twice as much.—Com. Mo. Dec. 1922.

cluding a small amount of coal, considerable deposits of iron ore, and fair resources of copper, lead, zinc, and mercury. Yet exploitation of these has been slow and has in many cases been left largely to foreign capital and enterprise, so that the profits of their refining and utilization have gone abroad. There have been wide gaps in the economic scheme so that even where raw materials were present, they were unused or else exported and then reimported in manufactured form. Thus in 1923 she imported 181,000 tons of phosphate, yet millions of tons lie within Spain untouched. She has regularly imported sulfur, but exported millions of tons of pyrite. She is one of the world's leading citrus fruit and wine producers, yet in 1922 she imported some 365 tons of citric and tartaric acid, exporting the raw materials. Only since the World War has there been a vigorous attempt to stimulate industrial development.

Inefficient Governments.—In the instability of their governments, both Spain and Portugal recall Balkan conditions. The Spanish monarchy now overthrown represented an outworn system suited for the 16th century. So frequent have been the cabinet changes that constructive work has been impossible. Thus between 1902 and 1923 there were 33 different ministers or an average of one every $7\frac{1}{2}$ months.

Waste, corruption and inefficiency has characterized the governmental machinery for decades. Vast sums were used in the conquest of Morocco. A great army of civil service employees far beyond the needs of the country has been a heavy drain on the treasury. Deficits in the annual budget have been an annual recurrence for many years, and have had to be made up by loans resulting in depreciation of the currency and mounting interest costs. The system of taxation is antiquated and unjust. The minister of agriculture estimated a few years ago that even in Madrid province more than half of the taxable land escaped assessment.

Gross neglect of educational needs is amply evidenced by the fact that more than one-half of the population of Spain is illiterate.³ One-fourth of the young are educated by the State; one-fourth by the Church. There are as many priests, and almost twice as many monks and nuns, as there are teachers in the entire State staff. But 3 per cent of the national expenditures was devoted to education in 1930, the service of the debt and the military and naval program absorbing the great bulk of the national revenues. The proportion of the national expenditures devoted to education is the smallest of any progressive country.⁴

³ Of those over six years of age 54 per cent are estimated to be unable to read or write. This is five or six times the proportion in France.

⁴ The London Times, Aug. 10, 1926.

Lack of popular support has forced the monarchy to ally itself with the army. The latter in turn has taken advantage of the situation and, on occasion, has usurped the civil authority. In spite of the natural isolation of Spain with the protection afforded by the Pyrenees, the expenditures for military and naval purposes is vastly disproportionate. Spain has one officer for every ten soldiers, a proportion double that in France.

The Church in Spain has long aligned itself alongside of a reactionary and autocratic government. It has used its great power to repress freedom of thought and the expression of independent opinion. With few exceptions it has pursued a narrow, intolerant policy, and "its educational system has been antiquated and thoroughly bad."⁵

In general, then, it seems to the writer that the decline of Spain has been a real one and that the major responsibility rests upon the people. The environment is a difficult one, but the inhabitants have not set themselves seriously to the task of adapting themselves to it; of employing modern knowledge and inventions for utilizing their resources as they might have. The very fact that its former population was in this same setting, once much further advanced, and the fact that a neighbor such as Italy with no better resources, has progressed much farther, and lastly the fact that Catalonia is an exception to the general decadence of Spain, seems to furnish ample proof of the human responsibility. The World War forced action, and there are many signs of an awakening. As this is being written, news comes that the monarchy is being overthrown. It will be interesting to see whether or not there may be a rejuvenation which may lift the country out of its slough of despair.

⁵ S. de Madariaga, *Spain*, Chas. Scribner's Sons, N. Y., 1930.