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The Spanish King Alfonso XIII's Humanitarian Work during World War I: The Creation of the European War Office (1914 – 1919)

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ABSTRACT
After 100 years, archival evidence and intellectual contributions have reached the public domain, permitting vibrant discourse on the First World War. Many commemorations focus on the particular national sacrifice rendered, but the war's international character should also be remembered. While historians have analysed the belligerent nations, neutral countries like Spain have received little attention. Some European governments declared neutrality in 1914; several later joined the war. However, Spain stayed neutral throughout the conflict and also accomplished the unexpected. King Alfonso's European War Office at Madrid's Royal Palace combined personal and official humanitarian action, allowing Spain to pursue active neutrality in the First World War. The Office was formed in 1915 in response to Alfonso XIII's high number of anxious demands regarding the location, care, and re-patriation of loved ones (both soldiers and civilians). It was handled by a small team of up to 50 staff members, assisted by Spain's substantial diplomatic network overseas. The European War Office chose to file and maintain all missives from requestors, resulting in a significant collection of letters and files in the Royal Palace Archives. This article describes the humanitarian initiative created by the Spanish monarch, Alfonso XIII, during World War I. It was known as the Office of Pro Captives or Office of the Great European War. Because Spain stayed neutral during the conflict and because the king and the Spanish ambassadors in the countries that were fighting worked as peacemakers, thousands of people were able to find their missing loved ones.

Keywords: First World War; Alfonso XIII; monarchy; Spain.

INTRODUCTION
Alfonso XIII was born on the 17th of May, 1886 in Madrid, Spain and died on the 28th of February, 1941 in Rome, Italy (Peers, 1941). He was the Spanish monarch between the years of 1902 and 1931. Alfonso XIII, the posthumous son of Alfonso XII, was declared

king under the regency of his mother, Mara Cristina (González-Aja, 2011). On his 16th birthday in 1902, he assumed full authority as king (Hall¸2003).

Following the demise of Spain's colonial empire in the Spanish-American War of 1898, the young king was the clearest example of a new generation that could reshape the face of Spain. Alfonso saw himself as the long-awaited "regenerator" who would bring Spain back to prosperity and help it regain its place in the world. The young King Alfonso XIII, who began his reign under difficult circumstances in 1902, right after Spain's humiliating defeat by the United States, was eager to re-establish Spain among the bigger European nations and regain some of its previous splendor (Hall¸2003). Alfonso desired to take an active role, particularly in diplomatic affairs, and believed that achieving neutrality during the First World War would be seen favourably once hostilities ended.

In Spain, the First World War coincided with a time of enormous internal upheaval and the country's fast diminishing international influence. The numerous conflicting groups inside Spain associated themselves with either of the belligerent blocs, generating a schism in Spanish society and allowing the *Entente* and the *Central Powers* to establish some form of power over the nation. Given Spain's military and economic weaknesses as of that time, as well as political problems, the country's declaration of neutrality at the outset of World War I was not unexpected. Although the choice to remain neutral was first welcomed with universal approval among Spaniards, it rapidly became a contentious subject, sparking intense public discussion. Given Spain's inherent volatility, King Alfonso XIII had no option but to pursue this course of action, despite the fact that it was not without repercussions. Despite the persistent pressure to break the neutrality stance, doing so would have been even more catastrophic if Spain had decided to enter the war. As Efraim Karsh (1988) said, "Not only is neutrality not 'blessed' with the characteristics associated with it, but the effective pursuit of this policy demands the finest foreign policy tools" (p. 32). Thus, even though the policies and actions of King Alfonso XIII from 1914 to 1918 have been rightly looked at and criticized, no one can ignore the diplomatic courage it took to keep going in the face of so much trouble.

During the war, the situation of the monarch was comparable to that of many European aristocrats. National allegiances increasingly trump family bonds and relationships. Queen Victoria Eugenia, the wife of Alfonso, had two brothers and an uncle participating in the war, while Maria Christina's brother commanded the Austro-Hungarian army (Rippon, 2019). Due to Alfonso's familial ties to both belligerents, the Spanish monarch was almost compelled to maintain excellent relations with both sides without antagonising either and, most critically, without being accused of violating Spain's neutrality. As he attempted to insulate Spain from the horrors of war, he was first and foremost dedicated to Spain. Therefore, his examination of Germany's territorial concessions might be seen as an effort to leverage the war between the major countries to obtain something for Spain, as opposed to forming a tighter alliance with the Central Powers. However, via his European War Office, Alfonso XIII served as a go-between in both a diplomatic and humanitarian role throughout a war that claimed over ten million lives. For the last eight years, specialists have combed through more than 200,000 of the letters the European War Office received—140,000 of them from soldiers' families—and revealed one of Spain's most astounding diplomatic triumphs (Den Hertog & Kruizinga, 2011).

The train carrying the previous monarch of Spain, Alfonso XIII, arrived at the Paris railway station around midnight on April 16, 1931 (Strunsky, 1931). Two days earlier, Alfonso had abdicated the kingdom and fled to France to live in exile. The former monarch

was surprised to see that the residents of Paris had gathered to greet him in a manner often reserved for great national heroes. As he exited the train, the tens of thousands of people gathered at the station began to yell in unison: "Vive le Roi! Vive le Roi!" "Long live the King!" (Vive le Roi). In their enthusiasm, the people tore down the security barricades, almost crushing the former monarch and his bodyguards. They successfully escaped the station and made their way to the Hotel *Le Meurice on Rue de Rivoli*. Even there, Parisians applauded and sang his name. Alfonso, overcome with emotion, went outside and could only stammer "merci, merci." According to one Parisian newspaper, the applause of the throng was tremendous.

The essence of this work is to expose King Alfonso XIII's humanitarian work during World War I.

THE ROLE OF THE SPANISH KING DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The First World War wrecked destruction on four continents (Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe) as great powers collided in a struggle that left millions dead and injured, four empires decimated, and the world attempting to cope with the horrors of 1914–1918 (Garfield, 2010). The impact of the war upon the belligerents is apparent. Both Britain and France suffered numerous casualties and economic ruin at the war's conclusion. Yet they were the victors. In 1917, Russia fell into revolution, while Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey saw their previous influence dissipate. Even other countries like Italy, Romania, and Bulgaria suffered during the conflict. The First World War left no country unaffected, even neutral states like Spain. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Spain was one of Europe's largest empires. Spain formerly controlled the continent, but her dominion fell behind as the globe industrialised and expanded. Slow industrial growth left Spain economically deprived, and it lost its foreign possessions following the 1898 Spanish-American War.

During the First World War, Spain was still reeling from these events. Spain had considered intervening. However, recognising the seemingly insurmountable obstacles, Spain's authorities realised the country was in no position to become involved in a European battle and believed their refusal to participate would eventually benefit the ailing nation. The government announced Spain's neutrality, launching a four-year diplomatic roller coaster. Unlike Italy, Romania, and Bulgaria, it did not join the war directly and stayed neutral the whole time. During the war, King Alfonso XIII launched the first Spanish international humanitarian project. This monarch's personal project meant Spain could establish a positive "non-material balance" from neutrality. King Alfonso XIII's government accepted imperial representation in ally nations from the start of the war. As the war proceeded, more nations required humanitarian help, causing "frantic diplomatic activity of the Spanish ambassadors, particularly in the most chastised European countries." Several of Alfonso XIII's relatives from other European families also fought in the war. His uncles Frederick, Charles Stephen, and Eugene of Austria commanded the Austro-Hungarian Empire's forces, while his brothers, Princes Alexander, Leopold, and Maurice of Battenberg, served in the British army (Luzón, 2012). This fact made King Alfonso XII more sensitive than other European monarchs to the plight of fighters and their families.

From the start of the war, letters from warring countries started arriving at King Alfonso XIII's Royal Palace in Madrid, Spain's capital. They questioned the king about the state of some warriors in the war. When the battle dragged on and more fighters joined, the families of soldiers needed to appeal to a neutral king to learn about the fate

of the soldiers. Since no government directly involved in the war could supply accurate data on dead soldiers or enemy prisoner records, this is because most were "lost." Some soldiers' families ran to neutral nations, which have the right and duty to help provide this information. Furthermore, the second Hague Peace Conference in 1907 agreed that a neutral state should provide humanitarian aid to the combatants (Rosenne2001).

An article in *La Petite Gironde* on June 18, 1915 "accidentally" revealed King Alfonso XIII's office's formation. A French widow had implored Alfonso XIII to help find her husband, a soldier injured in the Battle of Charleroi on August 28, 1914 (Pérez de Arcos, 2021). The newspaper said the Spanish king would have ordered diplomats in Paris and Berlin to find the soldier. The Monarch's office wrote to his wife that he was alive in a German prison camp. After this publication, hundreds of French citizens wrote to the Monarch's office asking for help finding relatives. The foreign press spread the news, including a lot of British newspapers and the German *Berliner Tageblatt*, causing a wave of petitions to arrive at King Alfonso XIII's Palace. On October 24, 1914, King Alfonso XIII created the Great European War Office. It was funded by royal patrimony revenue, making it independent of the government and official budgets. First, the office offered "informational aid" to find imprisoned or missing civilians and soldiers. Put them in touch with their families or try to repatriate them to improve their situation. The king used international contacts and Spanish embassies in Brussels, Rome, Berlin, and Vienna.

Faced with a rising tide of letters, the monarch added more officials and volunteers between July and August 1915. By 1918, it had a staff of nearly fifty people, including volunteers, employees, and collaborators who spoke multiple languages. As the Great European War dragged on and became international in scope, so did the number of lost people. The office expanded their costs, of which the monarch gave his approval. Alfonso XIII's private secretariat budget was 1,000 pesetas a month; however, this was doubled as of July 1915 due to the humanitarian help. In certain circumstances, he dictated and signed the letters personally. At the end of his life, he realised that the creation of the Great European War Office was his most satisfying achievement. He was pleased with his humanitarian activities and retained neutrality through them. Julián Cortés once asked the king which incident had the most impact on Spain's political, social, and economic life during his reign. The Monarch answered, "Neutrality throughout WWI to save lives and avert peace's horrors" (Link 215, p. 43).

For the first time in Spain's history, due to King Alfonso XIII's humanitarian project, the state and citizens worked together on a project (Pérez de Arcos, 2021). Spanish soldiers supported neutrality. Spanish commanders didn't fight in the World War, but they volunteered to examine medical ships and 1,500 prison camps (Detwiler 1971). Alfonso XIII's humanitarian intervention included sending inspectors aboard medical ships to interfere. For instance, the ships that crossed the Mediterranean Sea from the east to the west and the British across the Atlantic to the British Isles began to torpedo, contrary to the Hague Conventions, aggravating the situation in 1917. The Germans accused the *Entente Powers* of using these ships to transport troops and weapons. British officials solicited Alfonso XIII's intercession. The Monarch reached a "non-aggression" pact with these British hospital ships, assuring them they would only convey injured medical staff and medical goods, which the Spanish delegates could check at the ports of departure (Preston, 2002). The German government demanded that the delegates stay on board during the voyage so they could not introduce forbidden information. The British government agreed, ending the disputes.

Alfonso XIII used his relationships with Britain and Germany to strengthen the Office of Pro Captives' powers, notably in the exchange of wounded or ill. The king made the principal Spanish ports accessible to warring countries. The efforts undertaken and the king's determination to keep the office running throughout the war cannot be compared to any other endeavour by a head of state during that time. The data's enormity and extent are still shocking. Over 122,000 French and Belgian prisoners of war, 7,950 British, 6,350 Italians, 400 Portuguese, 350 Americans, and 250 Russians received help from the Office of the Great European War. 21,000 ill prisoners were swapped, and 70,000 civilians were evacuated from Spanish ports (Herrmann, 1997). Despite these outcomes and the efforts of the monarch and his workers, mediation and humanitarian relief did not entirely succeed. This is because neutral countries were unable to end the war, and Alfonso XIII was never asked to help bring about peace.

However, King Alfonso XIII remained neutral in the conflict, limiting its damage and aiding many people within our borders. Even after the March 1917 Russian Revolution and Tsar's resignation, which brought political instability and catastrophe to Western Europe, Alfonso XIII's attitude to neutrality remained the same. Due to its economic and military circumstances, Spain had to remain neutral. The Office of the Great European War's humanitarian mission transformed a neutrality that was compelled by circumstances into an active neutrality that benefited the nation non-materially. Alfonso XIII constantly portrayed the Office of the Great European War, both within and without its borders, as maintaining active neutrality, assisting men rather than governments, supporting families, and rejecting the prevalent view that nothing could be done until the war was over. During World War II, both inside and outside of Spain, things were not easy, but the country, with its monarch at the helm, did things that no one expected from a neutral country.

THE OPERATION OF THE OFFICE

The successes the Great European War Office achieved wouldn't have been possible without the office staff's commitment, the cooperation of government officials and civilians, and the administration of His Majesty's Private Secretary, Emilio de Torres (Réval, 1917). Expanded tasks confronted everybody. About fifty employees in the office showed a massive workload. They processed 500 urgent requests for death row prisoners' pardons; over 5,000 for wounded repatriation; 25,000 for information on relatives in occupied territories; and over 250,000 for information or assistance to missing persons or prisoners from around the world; prison camp improvements; and the collection of war orphans (Stone, 1979). Most of these requests came from people, generally family members, while some were controlled by organisations or organisations, either associated with Spain, such as "The Spanish Catholic Mission in Paris," or social or philanthropic, such as the "Ligue Patriotique des Française."

By 1915, the Great European War Office included these departments:

1. Missing persons information service
2. Information and correspondence services in the occupied territories
3. Prisoner of War Service
4. service for the repatriation of military personnel, seriously injured or sick, and civilians.
5. exchange and internment services in Switzerland.
6. processing of pardons for the death penalty

7. Penalty reduction to imprisonment and forced labour
8. Remittance of funds to prisoners and refugees living in occupied territories.
9. and reports on inspection trips by Spanish delegates to the Spanish embassies in Berlin, Vienna, and Rome.

Several variables contributed to the success of these efforts. On the one hand, the professionalism of the Royal House personnel and volunteers – since it was a demanding assignment and the conditions were ideal for exalting people's spirits. The tabloid press reported on events affecting the many nations involved in the conflict. Workers and volunteers looked out for the common good and established an ethos of service with such vigour and feeling of obligation that they helped keep family members seeking their own alive. Camila Nebot, a volunteer, has been working at the office since April 1916. Camila opted not to go to work a year later because her sister became sick with typhus, putting the rest of her classmates at danger. Camila, on the other hand, wrote to her boss, requesting resources to continue carrying out humanitarian work from her home so that she would not be delayed. Camila was well aware that her labour supported hundreds of families throughout the globe (M Pérez de Arcos, 2021).

Aside from the expertise of these employees and volunteers, another intriguing aspect was the organisation with which they worked. When they got the letters, they followed due procedure: first, they highlighted the personal data and history of each of the people subject to the processes with a blue underline, and then they were categorised and disseminated. When letters were to be translated, the office had a staff of translators from the Ministry of State. Once the contents of the letters had been translated, a file containing the applicant's data was opened for each instance, and a procedure to reply to the requests was begun. They were categorised by a colour code based on nationalities, similar to the previously existing diplomatic books of each of the nations participating in the conflict, in one of the several token formats. For the search for missing individuals and information on detainees, the Service of Wounded and Prisoners of War was coloured differently: blue for the English, green for the Italians, white for the Germans, red for the Austrians, orange for the Russians, and yellow for the French and Belgians. Pink is the Information Service in Occupied Countries, which is utilised in incidents involving civilians. And, in blue, the Prisoner Repatriation and Exchange Service.

To categorise applications, a colour system was also devised, with various coloured ribbons applied to each dossier. The black ribbons represented the dead, the white ribbons represented those who had been discovered and whose cases were being processed, and the red ribbons represented those who had yet to be found. Files with hundreds of thousands of registered names were created, and flags symbolising the nations were affixed to them. Once the files had been classified and it was clear what kind of administration was required (search for the missing, news about the civilian population, giving money, repatriation, processing of pardons, sentence commutations, etc.), they were submitted to the appropriate office. The nominative files were prepared at these offices and then transmitted to our diplomatic offices, where the necessary processes were followed. The volunteers did not leave any data unaccounted for in these files, ensuring that everything was properly and meticulously stored. The labourers understood that the letter represented liberty in captivity. When armies or families are captured, they become completely isolated. They carried out humanitarian activities with the same good administration, accuracy, and delicacy that the Secretariat delivered news. As previously stated, almost all of the work was done by hand, and dictation was preferred, particularly in the

case of Secretary Emilio Torres, not only for the accuracy of the transcription but also for the time saved, which was required to continue with the search for and information on the disappeared. Because of the time it took to feed the paper into the machine to type extremely short reports, it was preferable to write them by hand using a fountain pen or a pencil first. It was a race against the clock since thousands of people's lives were on the line.

Once the embassies or diplomatic offices carried out the opportune formalities, the tokens were returned to the palace and included in the file. All types of tiles consisted of two parts separated by a dotted line. The superior contained all the data of the holder of the file, the petitioner, and the complete history of the management. This file remained in the Secretariat as a matrix and constitutes the main element of the Archive used to this day. In the other, all of the applicant's information was written down, and when it was done, it was separated from the top sheet and sent to the embassy or diplomatic office in charge of carrying out the different steps. The work of the embassies was also key to the achievements of the Office of the Great European War. Alfonso XIII had under his orders the Spanish diplomats, with whom he developed a relationship of mutual collaboration in order to comply with neutrality (Windler, 2001). Thanks also to the good relations and blood ties of the Spanish royal family with both sides, the office was able to serve people of numerous nationalities. And this is where the work of the embassies came in, since the nationality of the person holding the file and the protections assumed by Spain were key factors for sending the tokens to the different embassies. But sometimes, this caused conflicts, and diplomatic work had to be very prudent, as most of the countries in the world were fighting each other. For example, in Germany, difficulties often arose when they were staffed by an embassy in charge of enemy interests. The procedure was as follows: if there was a question of knowing where a prisoner of war or a missing French, Belgian, Russian, Portuguese, or other allied country in Germany was, or if the Secretary wanted to know where there were civilians in territories occupied by the Germans, the Secretary sent the file to the Embassy of Spain in Berlin. This embassy was in charge of protecting these countries while they were on enemy territory. From there, the request was sent to the German military or the Red Cross.

Of this diplomatic work, the press reported in the foreign media, talking about the repatriations through the intermediary of Alfonso XIII and the Spanish, French, and Belgian diplomats. However, King Alfonso XIII often handle some of the provoked situations with skill and tact. The Office responded to letters from every part of the world. But, it was necessary to respond to requests from countries whose interests in an enemy country were entrusted to other nations-as, for example, was the case of the British Empire, whose interests in Germany were in charge of the United States until its entry into the war; Alfonso XIII had given the direct order that Spain could not be involved. The king said that his country had to refrain from intervening directly in any management that does not relate exclusively to protégés of Spain. The work done by Spanish embassies and legations around the world, especially in Europe, was enormous. Diplomatic representations in Berlin, Brussels, Bucharest, Constantinople, London, Paris, Rome, Petrograd, Sofia, Vienna, and Bern put in tens of thousands of hours of work. This work, which was made possible by Spain's neutrality, helped make the inevitable harsh aftermath and bad luck of the war more human. As an example of the humanitarian work in which many Spanish ambassadors collaborated, there is that of Pablo Soler and Guardiola, ambassadors of Spain in Buenos Aires during the Great War. In the summer of 1917, he was in charge of

carrying out several relief works for the Lebanese and Syrian families residing in Argentina, agreeing to take charge of correspondence and transfers to the Turkish, Armenian, Syrian, and Israelite subjects. In his own words, he said that he followed the philanthropic work that Alfonso XIII had begun. These diplomats put the humane treatment of prisoners ahead of their own ideological preferences (Altable, 2011). This kept tempers calm and prevented retaliation by assuming or making sure that their soldiers' prisoners on the other side were treated badly.

But since these embassies were finally in charge of managing and resolving the demands of the relatives of the combatants, we can ask why they did not directly forward the letters to their embassies. Well, in the circumstances under which the First World War took place, with millions of people on the front lines or displaced, when a relative was considered missing, it did not mean that he had died. Once the governments informed the families, they went to the lists of prisoners of the *"Agence Internationale des Prisonniers de Guerre,"* under the protection of the International Red Cross or other similar organizations. If they did not find information there, the Office of the Great European War became their last hope. In fact, although the Office collaborated with *Agence Internationale*—considered the first experience of external humanitarian action by Spain—the Guardianship of the State of the Spanish Office had a higher range of effectiveness, especially in the application for pardons.

The French newspaper *Excelsior* published in May 1916 an article entitled "*La Neutralité Généreuse"* where it spoke of the offices that Alfonso XIII had installed in his palace under the direction of his private secretary. It read:

> Nothing is more curious and more characteristic than these offices of international charity, founded overnight under the influence of the current situation; nothing is nobler than the king's gesture as a general manager of a charitable enterprise created by him, with all expenses at his expense. As sovereign, Alfonso XIII observes absolute neutrality, but as director of these offices of international charity, he gives himself without reservation, without restrictions, to a work of kindness that knows no borders. The list of civilian and military prisoners who managed to obtain favours thanks to their intervention is already long. Also, the list of returnees and prisoners exchanged thanks to Alfonso XIII is endless. The number of letters received at the Royal Palace of Madrid, only from French subjects, is already approaching 200,000. For each of them, the secretariat opens a file, responds, addresses the ambassadors and finally implements all the means at its disposal to satisfy such requests.

As sovereign, Alfonso XIII observes absolute neutrality, but as director of these offices of international charity, he gives himself without reservation, without restrictions, to a work of kindness that knows no borders. The list of civilian and military prisoners who managed to obtain favours thanks to their intervention is massive. Also, the list of returnees and prisoners exchanged thanks to Alfonso XIII is also massive. The number of letters received at the Royal Palace of Madrid, only from French subjects, was in excess of 200,000. For each of them, the secretariat opens a file, responds, addresses the ambassadors, and finally implements all the means at its disposal to satisfy such requests. "

At that time, almost as today, the rekindling of a king or a politician of a neutral country expressing interest in their sufferings rekindled the hope of families. Headlines

reported that hundreds of letters, between 800 and 1000 per day, arrived daily from thousands of widows, sons, daughters, fathers, and mothers who clung to the Humanitarian Work of the King. The Spanish ambassador in Vienna, Antonio de Castro y Casaleiz, expressed the feelings of the relatives when, in September 1915, addressing Emilio de Torres, he told him that "the personal anguish of the one who seeks the disappeared relative appeals to all kinds of resources, noticing any reflection that does not tend to calm his anxieties" (Cortada, 2013, p. 223). But the work of the office was not limited only to procedures and collaboration with embassies. It was also necessary to carry out meticulous fieldwork in the prison camps. This was carried out by the Spanish military attachés when the need arose for the states at war to obtain truthful information about the situation of their fellow prisoners. Because communication between contenders was broken, governments needed accurate descriptions of the conditions in which their nationals found themselves. A few neutral countries and non-government groups, like the International Red Cross or the Young People's Christian Association of America (YMCA), were in charge of making these visits to prison camps and correctional facilities.

Spain was left in charge of the interests of Russia and France at the beginning of the war, making the first visits in October 1914 to the Königstein and Königsbrück Camps in Saxony and to the Bavarian camps of Munich and Lechfeld to assess the treatment of the French soldiers held there. During these visits, the Spanish attachés inspected all the facilities to see if they conformed to the agreements of the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907. Issues such as the capacity of the center, the situation in which it was located, the general services of electricity, water, kitchen, or heating, hygiene, sanitation, or the disciplinary regime, along with possible complaints and requests from prisoners, were evaluated and reflected in the reports. An example of the many visits that were made is that of the medical captain, Antonio Ferratges, who inspected the Döberitz camp in Brandenburg in 1917 (Wilkinson, 2017). The originals of these reports were kept in the Embassy and a copy was sent to the governments—whose interests were represented by our diplomats—and another to those responsible for the camps. As part of humanitarian visits, the attachés also used to distribute clothes and food to the prisoners.

One of the challenges in conducting these inspections was the huge number of prisoners and camps to visit. During the Great War, between 7 and 9 million people were captured by the rival side, figures never reached until that time. At that time, no country was prepared to face such a large number of prisoners (Fussell, 2009). In the first six months of the war alone, Russia had captured more than 300,000 soldiers; Germany about 625,000; Austria-Hungary more than 200,000; France about 50,000; and Britain about 15,000 (Motta, 2018). This was one of the reasons why the Spanish ambassador in Berlin, Luis Polo de Bernabé, complained to Emilio de Torres in October 1915. In order to carry out a monthly visit to the concentration camps, he requested an immediate increase in the most suitable, intelligent, and qualified officials. But as the number of camps and prisoners continued to increase, in May 1917, the Military Commission for the Inspection of Camps had to be created, in charge of the Colonel of the General Staff, Juan González Gelpi, who would reorganise the personnel of chiefs, officers, and doctors for the service of visits to prisoners, thus avoiding a mixture of civilians and military that would be the source of conflict. Over the course of the four years of war, nearly 4,000 visits were made to the internment camps. In addition to these visits, commissions of observers were also organised in January 1916 to attend the war fronts (Fussell, 2009). One of them was led

by Infante Charles of Bourbon, the widower of the king's older sister, Maria de las Mercedes, who visited the French front. Another commission was in charge of going to the English front, and a year later, in August 1917, another did the same with the German front.

Spain expressed a special interest in the commissions received by the different countries because, remember, in the Alfonsino era, humanitarianism could have a place for political benefit for Spain and the Monarchy. In the words of Emilio de Torres, if they did not achieve success, Spain could be dispensed with in the international sphere with serious damage when it suits us best by invoking services that we have provided that make us creditors to their gratitude. Even though King Alfonso XIII was never asked to play the coveted role of mediator in the World War I peace talks and Spain didn't play a big part in the new world order, other monarchs, leaders, and ordinary people outside of Spain were grateful to the Office and its monarch.

THE INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION OF THE OFFICE

In recent years, Spain has released newspaper pieces, books, and essays to expose King Alfonso XIII humanitarian work. From the exhibition put on by Patrimonio Nacional at the Royal Palace of Madrid in 2019, many people were able to learn more about what Alfonso XIII did to help people more than 100 years ago. In some nations, recognition occurred when humanitarian relief began and lasted years after the conflict. In France, the government deemed His Majesty a war hero because he repatriated 20,000 French people who had been sent to detention camps after the war surprised them in enemy territory. In April 1916, the French press emphasised the king's compassionate work of redeeming noble, humble, poor, and affluent victims by writing a lovely page in the yearbooks of Spain. In April 1918, they characterised him as a hero for pardoning 18 Belgians condemned to death in Antwerp, including numerous priests. When the new French ambassador, M. Alapetite, arrived in Spain in December 1918, he presented Alfonso XIII with a commemorative medal on behalf of the French government for his service throughout the war "on behalf of them and their families."

The British and American governments, the League of Nations, and the Belgian monarchs all recognised his role as a mediator. In October 1919, the king was well-received in Paris and London. The Belgian kings visited Alfonso XIII in Madrid in February 1921. Albert I was interested in the Royal Palace's European War Office statistics. The Spanish monarchs came to Brussels in 1923, when they were greeted by thousands in the Grand Place and thanked by Adolphe Max, the burgomaster of Brussels, who had been repatriated by Alfonso XIII. The international press praised the king and Spanish humanitarian intervention, and numerous organisations recognised the monarch. These organisations included the "French Académie des beaux-arts," the archbishopric of Paris under Cardinal Amette, and municipal companies and societies throughout France and Belgium. European and American scientists, artists, and writers congratulated the monarch and the Office. Edmond Rostand wrote a thank-you letter to Alfonso XIII in 1917; it's still in the Royal Palace Library. However, back home, the Spanish press didn't cover the king's humanitarian activities. It was not a government project, but rather a personal one by the monarch. The Spanish press did report broad admiration for the effort and acknowledgment from other nations, without getting into specifics regarding the humanitarian work. This news in Spain highlighted the king's charity, impartiality, worldwide recognition, and peace mission.

In the spring of 1917, a Spanish newspaper stated that the press throughout the globe commended Monarch Alfonso XIII's efforts and explained the system for the delivery of letters from all over the world and how the king addressed warring nations to send him news via an office in the Palace. Due to the high volume of letters received at the Palace, the temporary service may be made permanent. El Eco de Santiago claimed at the end of 1918: "Cardinal Mercier thanked King Alfonso XIII, who avoided numerous Belgian and other war fatalities." In January 1919, it was reported that the same ambassador delivered the Legion of Honor insignia to officers of the Spanish Navy who were aboard French hospital ships. Thanks to their presence on board our hospital ships, they knew how to make them respect them, thus fulfilling their good intentions to help their sovereign.

Alfonso XIII visited Verdun alongside Marshal Petain and the Spanish envoy Quiones de León that year, laying a wreath on the memorial of the nameless soldier. In 1921, he was the only neutral head of state to receive the Military Medal of the French Republic. The office's members were also recognised for their efforts. Romanones contemplated decorating solely Spanish ambassadors, but Emilio de Torres contacted the queen and concluded the recognitions were for their rank as chiefs or distinguished personnel for subordinate staff. Everyone in the workplace received an honorary or monetary award.

Diplomats received the "Reconnaissance Française" medal, while non-diplomats received the Silver Cross of Isabella the Catholic. By order of the Private Secretary, seven women who had worked in the office and the porters were not listed on lists of Secretariat workers for decorations to the Ministry of State. Maria Cristina proposed awarding women the Red Cross Silver Medal. The ordinances and porters were rewarded by the king's Private Secretariat for their wartime duty. Individual goalkeepers were paid $1. According to the Secretariat's finances, translators earned 150 to 200 pesetas (one to one-and-a-half dollars) each month, while auxiliary employees earned 50 pesetas (a third of a current dollar). Francisco Lastres, a lawyer and senator for life, nominated Alfonso XIII for the Nobel Peace Prize based on his humanitarian activity and neutrality. In 1917, Alfonso XIII looked to be a contender, but the Norwegian committee pronounced him vacant in the first three years of World War II. He approached the Norwegian Nobel Committee via diplomatic channels, according to the archives. In 1917, the prize was granted to the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Alfonso XIII didn't even recognise the honour, despite the Office of the Great European War's persistent and vital engagement with the Red Cross.

Albert de la Pradelle and Yanguas Messa of the Paris Institute of International Law tried again in 1933. Alfonso XIII was in exile in Rome following his abdication and the declaration of the Second Republic in 1931. His candidacy was presented as "Don Alfonso de Borbón y Habsburgo, former monarch of Spain." The honour went to British writer and politician Norman Angell because of the previous monarch's views. The press stated Alfonso XIII's image wasn't great and his former qualities weren't appreciated. The Norwegian committee was expected to remain objective in its assessment of Spain's political crisis. Recognizing ousted King Alfonso XIII may have been seen as interfering in Spain's political crisis, given the monarch's worldwide projection.

The Spanish population didn't forget that neutrality let them live on the edges of European battlefields as observers. People admired the king's humanitarian activities and his gentle, altruistic side. They witnessed how the political government cared about regular people, the Spanish social basis, and stopped them from dying daily in the trenches by

the hundreds, as occurred elsewhere during World War I. Europe wouldn't forget the monarch's and the office's efforts to help WWI troops. Alfonso XIII and his family departed Spain in 1931 and were greeted in Marseille, Paris, and London by jubilant crowds who recalled the humanitarian service Spain and her monarch did during World War I. Ten years later, on February 28, Alfonso XIII died of angina pectoris in Rome at age 54, but not because of his humanitarian activities, which are still recognised today in Spanish and international scholarly circles.

CONCLUSION

Alfonso XIII's reputation was harmed by events before the Great War in Spain; therefore, he wanted to present himself as a mediator between the combatant nations. In order to guarantee this position, he set up the Office of the Great European War, which was Spain's first effort to help people in other countries. This altruistic endeavour showed Spain's softer, more human side, along with its diplomats' and embassies' amazing organisation. The Office of the Great European War shows that humanitarian action doesn't need thousands of individuals or large organisations. Often, a small group of individuals with strong views and a drive to work, headed by a capable manager like the king's private secretary, Emilio M. de Torres, is enough. Through generosity and care for human life, the Office of the Great European War accomplished great achievements. During the First World War, its leader, Alfonso XIII, changed mandatory neutrality into active neutrality. This saved lives, helped thousands of people, and made the country stronger, especially internationally.

Humanitarian efforts by prominent politicians, artists, and other figures should never be forgotten. This Spanish monarch showed his peers kindness over a century ago. Even though they are in the past, it's crucial to keep these endeavours in mind for future study and instruction. It is also important to note that history helps human learn from errors and accomplishments. Disappearances, convictions, deportations, refugees, and fatalities continue to occur in many regions of the globe, impacting all five continents. Humanitarian activity is necessary. Wars must be studied to determine their causes. In today's world, learning about peace and helping others is becoming increasingly vital. Only in this manner can we improve our future and that of our grandchildren. This article's historical facts don't slip into obscurity; they gain popularity.

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