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Report : The Meetings at Montoire and Hendaye.

After the conclusion of the Three-Power Pact Hitler again turned his attention to Western Europe. For a time he entertained the idea of involving France as extensively as possible in the campaign against England, in addition of bringing General Franco into the war on the side of the axis powers. Thus, in October 1940 he went to France, where he held a conference with Laval in his special train at Montoire, a small town north of Tours, followed by meetings with Franco at Hendaye at the Franco-Spanish border on 23 October and with Petain in Montoire again on 24 October. Laval was also present at this meeting.

No tangible results followed the conferences with Laval and Petain. The French professed fundamental readiness to undertake a policy of collaboration with Germany, but the extent of this collaboration was not determined. At that time Hitler was plainly more concerned with making a favorable impression upon the French public through his meeting with Petain in which he played the part of the magnanimous conqueror, than to extract concessions on individual points. The French in turn displayed lively interest in getting a definite statement from Hitler on their colonial empire in Africa, emphasizing the great significance which such a statement would have for every Frenchman. Any statement which promised that France might retain her African empire was impossible however, because of the Italian designs upon Tunisia and the eastern part of the Sahara down to Lake Chad. In addition, Hitler knew before the meeting at Hendaye that the Spanish also wanted to gain territory at the expense of the French. Under these circumstances Hitler sought to avoid embarrassment by explaining that Germany was interested in having France retain her colonial empire, but that individual areas might have to be ceded to other countries by way of compensation. The question was not discussed in any more detail. At the time Ribbentrop intended that British possessions on the Guinea coast of Africa, particularly the rich colony of Nigeria, be used to make such compensations after the defeat of Great Britain.

The meeting with Franco in Hendaye was not completely satisfactory for Hitler. Hitler showed Franco beyond a doubt how favorable the chances were for Spain to regain Gibraltar, the key to the Mediterranean. Regarding Spanish territorial desires in Africa, which included all of Morocco and the region of Oran, Hitler avoided committing himself, but spoke of the necessity for assuring France of compensations in other ways in the event of territorial concessions.

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Franco, for his part pursued the tactic of agreeing to everything in principle, but with reservations which actually allowed him freedom of choice. He emphasized that Spain had to overcome a whole succession of difficulties which had arisen in the wake of the Civil War before it could take part in the war against England, and made Spanish entry into the war conditional upon extensive deliveries of foodstuffs and war materials. In particular, he reserved absolutely for himself determination of the time when Spain should enter the war.

At Hendaye, Franco was clearly unwilling to commit himself irrevocably. He was certainly quite justified in saying that he could not simply will his people in taking part in the war on the spur of the moment, because the people were not yet grown to the demands of another conflict. It is possible however, that he wished to wait out the war a little further, to see whether Hitler's star would remain in the ascendancy. It is certain that he would have been very glad to win such important prizes for Spain as Gibraltar and Morocco. In retrospect, one must say that Franco and his foreign minister Serrano Suñer, were very astute in their actions at that time. If they had made clear denial to Hitler then, they would not only have forfeited possible opportunities in the future, the shape of which could not be seen at that time, but also would have exposed themselves to the danger of Hitler forcing his way through to Gibraltar with a few armored divisions. Such a course of events was much less probable if they agreed in principle, but maintained reservations. The discussions between Hitler and Ribbentrop on one side, and Franco and Serrano Suñer on the other continued until nearly two o'clock in the morning. Then, when Hitler and Franco had departed in their respective directions, Ribbentrop finally succeeded in putting through his formulation, though incorporating the reservations which Franco had made. It was then only by airplane that Ribbentrop reached Montoire that afternoon, so as to be present at the conference of Hitler with Petain and Laval.

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