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A QUESTION OF AN EXCHANGE WITH SPAIN IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.

By Major T. R. HARKNESS, Royal Garrison Artillery.

MUCH has been said and written lately about the question of naval docks at Gibraltar. The primary object of these docks in time of war would be to keep up the speed of the fleet in adjacent waters by affording opportunity to the ships of having their bottoms cleaned. The repair of minor injuries received in action could also be carried out, but heavy pieces of work entailing large forgings, etc., would necessitate the vessels being sent home.

Gibraltar has belonged to Great Britain since 1704, and it seems somewhat unfortunate that the construction of docks has only been undertaken when they are no longer safe from the fire of a possible enemy. There is no doubt that the docks at present being constructed on the west side are exposed to the fire of long-range artillery from the Spanish mainland adjoining the bay. On this account many people have strongly advocated the construction of a harbour and docks on the east side, under the impression that they would be safe from attack. It is true that a dock could be constructed close into the cliffs on this side where a ship would be invisible from the Spanish coast within range, but it by no means follows that she would be safe from high-angle fire from the direction of the Queen of Spain's Chair. To protect this dock from the eastern gales it would be necessary to construct immense breakwaters, in deep soundings, at a cost of many millions of pounds. A very serious problem presents itself. Can we obtain the strategical objects aimed at in a more complete and satisfactory manner by any other means?

The answer appears to be Yes, if we will give up Gibraltar to Spain in exchange for other territory.

Many people are in favour of exchanging Ceuta, the opposite Pillar of Hercules for the Rock; in the belief that docks could be constructed there where our ships could repair and refit in safety. This is not the case.

An examination of a chart or map of the country near Ceuta will show that the peninsula, from a military point of view, is much the same as Gibraltar, with its faults intensified. The surrounding country, belonging to Morocco, is much nearer to the extreme point of Ceuta than the Spanish mainland is to Europa Point, and the hills within range have a substantial command over the highest part of the promontory, whereas the Rock commands all the country within range of the most modern guns. The country held by Spain consists of successive ranges of hills facing Ceuta, and decreasing in height as they approach it. It will thus be seen that the conditions are favourable to the deliberate attack. On the other hand, the country beyond the Spanish lines is so wild that extensive preparations would be necessary,

and large quantities of stores would have to be gathered together. It is unlikely that this would be undertaken unless the possession of the fortress was of great importance to the Power concerned. Thus, if it were made a dockyard, it would be liable to deliberate attack; but if only a torpedo-boat station, sudden raids supported by such guns as could be landed from ships, are all that might be expected.

The present Spanish defences on the land side are quite capable of resisting anything of this nature. They consist of a line of large stone towers, loop-holed for infantry and connected by telegraph. In support of these are what are called forts, but which are really only defensible barracks for infantry, without guns of any kind. Again, in rear of these are the elaborate old Portuguese fortifications stretching across the isthmus with a wet ditch from sea to sea, four feet deep at high water. These are not now armed, being entirely of stone and brick; but, all the same, they would be very useful in securing the peninsula from being rushed. They bear the marks of many a hammering from artillery, such as the Moors were able to bring against them in days gone by. The Spanish territory round is very fertile; a rich soil, and apparently plenty of water. Vines seem to do very well, and there is a certain amount of grain cultivation. The farm-houses have a clean and prosperous look.

The town of Ceuta is situated on the isthmus, just inside the old Portuguese fortifications. It also is clean and prosperous. The noticeable feature is the presence of convicts, earning their own living, without any guard over them. The only distinguishing mark between them and the rest of the inhabitants is a round brown flannel cap, like a forage cap. Above the town rises a dome-like hill of Ceuta itself, crowned by the convict establishment, where there are at present about two thousand convicts. It is only as a penal settlement that Ceuta can be said to be of any real use to Spain. The harbour consists of a small bay, with fairly deep water close in shore, on the north side of the isthmus. It is defended by several works, some of them mounting modern breech-loading guns of great power. There are also forts near the lighthouse, on the east side, to prevent long-range bombardment. A camber for torpedo-boats and destroyers could easily be constructed on the west side of the bay, protected from artillery fire from the direction of the mainland. It will thus be seen that Ceuta would make a very useful coaling station, and afford a base from which torpedo craft could raid adjacent waters and make the passage of the straits insecure.

All this, however, brings us no nearer the provision of dock accommodation for large vessels, so we must look elsewhere, and no place in the western waters of the Mediterranean seems to meet the case better than Minorca, with its magnificent harbour of Port Mahon.

An examination of a large-scale map will show that Port Mahon offers great facilities for the construction of docks secure from attack. The harbour consists of an arm of the sea, about three miles long, with deep water creeks running off it on both sides, and two or three islands in the middle. Its width averages about half a mile. There is excellent anchorage for a large number of the heaviest battle-ships, the holding ground consisting mostly of sand, shells, and gravel. Along its sides run hills protecting it from fire, and offering sites for forts with a good command of the surrounding country. The highest points of these hills are at the entrance to the harbour, where the old Fort St. Philip and the modern and powerful La Mola deny the passage.

If there are no engineering objections, Port Mahon thus appears to be an ideal place for the construction of dry docks. Its position is about six hundred miles from Gibraltar, which may at first seem an objection, but further examination will show that it is in a grand naval strategical position. It lies, more or less, at the centre of a circle, on the circumference of which are the great naval ports of Cartagena, Toulon, Genoa, and Spezzia. Should the fleets of possible enemies be attempting to combine for any of these ports, no better naval base could be asked for than Port Mahon for a blockading fleet. It also lies in the direct line between Toulon and Algeria, and would menace the communication between the south of France and that great French colony.

Holding the whole island, the supplies of food and water to the fortress of Port Mahon would be a small question compared to that in Gibraltar, where we are dependent on Spain and Morocco for fresh meat, and the heavens for water. The island of Minorca, about two hundred and sixty square miles in extent, is well stocked with cattle, sheep, goats, and mules, pasturage being abundant. Fruits of various kinds, and vegetables, are plentiful, and wheat and barley are cultivated. Thus provisions are plentiful and cheap, and the water supply need cause no anxiety.

Minorca was captured by the British four years later than Gibraltar, *i.e.*, in 1708, after little resistance. We held it, with great advantage to the fleet, till 1756. In this year a great French expedition was planned against it. The British fleet was enticed away on other work. Then the Duc de Richelieu, with fifteen thousand men in a hundred and twenty transports, convoyed by La Galissonnière with twelve sail of the line, laid siege to Port Mahon, in which was a meagre garrison under General Blakeney.

They held out most gallantly in Fort St. Philip for seventy days, but eventually capitulated with the honours of war. It was during this siege that the relief was attempted by Byng, without success. For this he was superseded and eventually tried by court-martial and shot.

In 1763 we regained Minorca by exchanging for it Cuba and the Philippines, so recently lost by Spain to the United States of America. We once more lost Minorca, after a memorable siege, in 1782. On this occasion the expedition started from Cadiz, under the Duke of Crillon, as if to attack the British West Indies, but turning round, slipped through the straits and sailed for Minorca; where they landed eight thousand men. General Murray, the Governor, retired into Fort St. Philip with his small force of four regiments, and did not surrender until it had been reduced by scurvy and other diseases to six hundred. He then gave in on honourable terms, and marched out between the lines of the besieging force, which had been reinforced to a strength of fourteen thousand.

Minorca capitulated to Sir Charles Stuart in 1798, after the battle of the Nile, but in 1802 the then Government, thinking Malta sufficient for our wants in the Mediterranean, ceded it to Spain under the treaty of Amiens.

We now come to the political question. Would it be possible to effect with Spain an exchange of Gibraltar for Minorca or Ceuta? It is, to a great extent, a question of national pride. We look on the Rock as a landmark in our history, especially in connection with the great siege of 1779-82. Spain looks on it as a part of her fatherland, and in her history it has fourteen sieges. Any of those who have come

into contact with the Spaniard can know how deeply he resents our retention of this part of his country, the original acquisition of which was effected under very questionable circumstances.

Ceuta is only a penal settlement on the African coast, which costs a good deal of money and would probably be parted with without regret. Minorca, far removed from the mainland, is inhabited by a people who are not Spaniards, and it affords but a small diminishing revenue. As seen above, it has several times been in our hands. Traces of our occupation are to be found to this day in many English words in the local dialect. The inhabitants caused a certain amount of trouble by agitation under British rule, but now they recognise that under it they were far more prosperous than under France or Spain, and would welcome it back.

Any small revenue lost to Spain in Minorca would be amply replaced by the increased tobacco revenue which the Spanish customs would receive with Gibraltar under their control. The smuggling question is a very sore point with the Spanish government. The Rock forms a natural depôt whence the Spaniard coming in to work by day and leaving at night, smuggles tobacco in large and small quantities. It has been stated that Gibraltar imports twenty times more tobacco than it smokes. If this be true (and no doubt it is believed by the Spaniard), he has a just cause for complaint.

This proposed exchange of Gibraltar for other territory is one of old standing, having been proposed by several Ministries. As far back as 1757, Pitt proposed its restoration to Spain in exchange for Minorca. No doubt that great statesman saw that, from one point of view, Gibraltar is a weakness to Great Britain. It is the bait which could be held out to Spain by any Power wishing to induce her to join an alliance against us. Spain may not appear to be a very favourable antagonist at present, but the use of the ports of Ferrol and Cartagena would be of great assistance to the alliance.

To sum up, the advantages to be gained by the exchange would be:—

1. A superior strategical position in the Mediterranean.
2. The provision of docks in a secure position at Port Mahon, at less cost than in Gibraltar.
3. More friendly relations with Spain.