

# Spain's King Juan Carlos supported 1981 coup attempt

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The German Foreign Ministry has declassified several diplomatic documents under its 30-year data disclosure law. The magazine *Der Spiegel* has published communiqué 524, sent by the then German ambassador to Spain, revealing the “understanding if not even sympathy” of King Juan Carlos for an attempted coup d’état on February 23, 1981, during which parliament and the cabinet were held hostage for 18 hours.

According to Zaragoza University history professor Julián Casanova, the communiqué is “extraordinarily important” because “it is the only written proof to date that Juan Carlos might have secretly been nostalgic for the kind of military rule that Franco had taught him to appreciate.”

The young Juan Carlos had been appointed as his heir apparent by General Francisco Franco, leader of the military uprising against the Second Republic in 1936 and head of the fascist dictatorship from 1939 until his death in 1975. Casanova has had little luck in unearthing what actually happened during the 1981 coup attempt, known popularly as 23-F, because records from Spanish sources and from the United States embassy in Madrid will remain under lock and key until 2031.

The communiqué with Bonn shows that even the German ambassador was surprised at Juan Carlos’s attitude to the military plot, saying that his words were “nearly apologetic.”

“The leaders only wanted the same thing we are all striving for, namely, the re-establishment of order, discipline, security and calm,” the king told the ambassador.

Lahn explained how Juan Carlos “did not express indignation or revulsion towards the actors.” Instead, he blamed former Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez, who

he said “despised the Army” because Suárez had failed to “take into account the demands of the military.” Juan Carlos told Lahn, “they started acting on their own.”

He relates how the king told him that 23-F “should be forgotten as soon as possible” and how he was planning to intercede before the government and the military justice in favour of the plotters so that “nothing too serious happens to them”.

Amongst the plotters was Juan Carlos’s educator, trainer and close confidant, General Alfonso Armada, whom the king had appointed as deputy chief of the defence staff just 11 days before the coup attempt. According to *Der Spiegel*, Armada “used his proximity to the king to make his fellow conspirators believe that he was acting on his instructions.”

At the time, Spaniards were told that the king had opposed the 23-F coup and that his televised address, which came six hours after the hostage-taking, urging the maintenance of law and order and the continuation of the elected government, had saved democracy from the claws of the old fascists and the military. The ruling elite have tried to maintain this myth up to the present day.

A central role has been played by the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) and the Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE). They have always maintained that the king was the guarantor of democracy during and after the transition from fascism, following Franco’s death on November 20, 1975. Two days later, Juan Carlos was declared king.

The PCE and the PSOE, together with sections of the old regime, worked together to prevent a revolutionary reckoning with fascism and devise a new constitutional monarchy under which its crimes would be “forgiven and forgotten” in the transition from fascism to democracy. Santiago Carrillo, then leader of the

Communist Party, justified the creation of a constitutional monarchy, saying the king would not last. Carrillo dubbed him “Juan Carlos the Brief.”

However, when the 23-F coup attempt took place and was confronted with a movement in the working class against it—beginning with mass strikes by Asturian miners—Carrillo took front rank among those insisting that only the king had saved democracy.

The monarchy’s spokesmen have dismissed the recent revelations, questioning the real motives of the German ambassador for sending the communiqué, and proclaiming, “The role of the king in defence of the constitution and democracy is clear for the whole of Spanish society.”

However, there have been thousands of comments in the press and on the Internet questioning the king’s legitimacy and asking how those responsible got away with all the lies.

In particular, a video of an interview with the young Juan Carlos in the 1960s is getting a new airing. In it, he states, “General Franco is, historically and politically, a truly significant figure for Spain. He was the one that took us out of, and resolved, our crisis of 1936. After that he played a political role to take us out of the Second World War. Because of that, during the last 30 years he has laid the bases for the development we have made today, as you can yourself ascertain.”

Questioned as to what General Franco represented for him personally, Juan Carlos added, “For me, he is a living example, day by day, because of his patriotic performance at the service of Spain, and because of that I have a great affection and respect for him.”

Last October, well before the present crisis, a Centre of Sociological Research poll on the degree of confidence generated by official institutions showed that the monarchy had less than a 50 percent rating—the first time since the polls started in 1994. Particularly high was the distrust among the young between 18 and 24. This was around the time the king’s son-in-law, Iñaki Urdangarin, was accused of embezzling money from public contracts awarded to a non-profit foundation that he headed.

In the context of the ongoing trial against Judge Baltasar Garzón, for attempting to investigate the crimes of the Franco regime and so breaking the “Pact of Forgetting”, the latest revelations are particularly significant.

The pent-up historical issues of the revolution, the civil war, and the Franco dictatorship are emerging again. People are asking questions about the suppression of the truth and the cover-up of the dictatorship’s crimes. The figure of the king was central to holding together the network of half-truths, lies and cover-ups put together by the CPE and the PSOE in alliance with the fascists that have dominated Spanish politics for the past decades.



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