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The Treaty of Aranjuez- A Turning Point in History (Research Paper)

When discussing the American Revolutionary War, the contributions of the French to the Patriots' struggle for independence from England are routinely highlighted. However, one major contributor to the fight for independence is often left out. It was the support from New Spain (often through Texas) that provided the necessary push that was essential to defeat the largest military in the world at the time. Therefore, a turning point in history was the Treaty of Aranjuez, between the French and the Spanish, which brought the resources of Spain to the 13 colonies, helping them defeat the British.

For most of the 16th century, Spain was the strongest maritime power in the world, controlling the majority of two continents and jurisdiction over enormous amounts of land and silver.¹ Despite the heart of the Spanish colonies being located in South and Central America, the Viceroyalty of New Spain held over 2 million square miles of territory in North America, with some notable areas being modern-day Cuba, Florida, Texas, California, and Mexico. These colonies also had immense geopolitical importance to their mother country. Thus, the Spaniards had a keen interest in ensuring that their holdings were safe from British encroachment. After the Seven Years' War between France and Britain (1763), Spain was given Louisiana under the Treaty of Fontainebleau and would keep it until 1801.² During that time, Spain always harbored a desire for further expansion into British territory, and during the Revolutionary War, they would finally get that chance. After the treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, the Spanish believed that it

¹ [The 6 Most Powerful Countries Throughout History - International Relations Careers](#)

² [How did Louisiana become Spanish? A new video tells the story behind the transfer | The Historic New Orleans Collection \(hnoc.org\)](#)

was their right to control the New World. Britain remained the main roadblock to that goal. In particular, during peace negotiations after the Seven Years' War, Spain grudgingly gave Florida to Britain, in exchange for returning Cuba and the Philippines, which Britain had occupied during the Seven Years' War.³ Being a Spanish colony at that point for 250 years, Spanish King Charles III very much wanted Florida back, as it was a critical seaport and trading base.

English privateers had been attacking Spanish trade vessels throughout the 1700's, hurting Spanish commerce in the region. After the Intolerable Acts were passed and British troops began to occupy many colonial cities in the early 1770s, some citizens of the 13 colonies began to openly revolt and counterattack.⁴ Colonial leaders such as Benjamin Franklin and George Washington called on many European enemies of Britain to send aid in the fight for Independence. Some countries petitioned for help including France, Spain, and the Netherlands. In particular, France jumped on the opportunity and wanted to retake the Louisiana territory that it had lost earlier in the Seven Years' War. The British military outnumbered and outgunned the colonists, and without French intervention, many major victories would've been impossible.⁵ Spain was also eager to get in on the action. However, waging a war more than 3000 miles from home would be a logistical nightmare, so the Spanish opted to use their colonies as a base of operations. After months of sending supplies secretly to the colonies via France, Spain formalized diplomatic ties with the nascent United States through France with the Treaty of Aranjuez in 1779, bringing Spain into the Revolutionary War on the side of France and the colonies.⁶

³ [The British Period \(1763-1784\) - Fort Matanzas National Monument \(U.S. National Park Service\) \(nps.gov\)](#)

⁴ [Three things you didn't know about the American Revolution \(rochester.edu\)](#)

⁵ [France in the American Revolution | American Battlefield Trust \(battlefields.org\)](#)

⁶ [Treaty of Aranjuez \(1779\) - George Washington's Mount Vernon](#)

Spain's primary objectives remained to retake its lost colonies and defend existing protectorates in the South and West. At the time of the Treaty of Aranjuez, Spanish Louisiana encompassed all of present-day Texas. Bernardo de Galvez, its governor, kicked off the Anglo-Spanish (1779-1783) conflict theater by besieging Fort Bute, in present-day Louisiana.⁷ After breezing through British defenses, Galvez captured Pensacola, the capital of West Florida, and began annexing Florida back into New Spain. While patriotic spirits were high in New England, the southern colonies of Georgia and South Carolina were significantly more loyal to the British and thus were a liability for the colonists during the Revolution.⁸ However, the Spanish incursions into Florida forced Britain to lock down its southern flank, using critical troops and resources in its defense. Specifically, Texas was vital in safeguarding New Spain and its constituents, allowing Galvez to continue pushing the British out of the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida. This refocusing on the South was crucial to preventing wholesale British domination of Patriotic armies in the Northeast. Thus, while often sidelined by names like Marquis de Lafayette or Baron von Steuben, Bernardo de Galvez remained an unsung yet crucial ally of the Americans.⁹ None of this would have been possible without help from Texas itself. To move quickly and avoid an ambush, Galvez rapidly requisitioned over 2000 horses and livestock from Texas, which proved vital to the widespread success of the attacks on British Florida.¹⁰

The monarchs of both France and Spain were from the same royal family, the House of Bourbon, and were both Catholic and so remained natural allies against the Protestant English. Spain had been providing aid to the colonies and France in secret, but the Treaty of Aranjuez represented a historical turning point, as Spain was no longer afraid to show its support, and

⁷ **Bernardo de Gálvez: Spanish Hero of the American Revolution-Book**

⁸ [Siege of Charleston - 1780 · George Washington's Mount Vernon](#)

⁹ [The Little-Remembered Ally Who Helped America Win the Revolution | History| Smithsonian Magazine](#)

¹⁰ [Texas and the American Revolution - Journal of the American Revolution \(allthingsliberty.com\)](#)

characterized the belief that America was an idea worth investing in. The notion was summarized with a declaration by the Spanish Chief Minister in March of 1777, declaring that “the fate of the colonies interests us very much, and we shall do everything for them that circumstances permit”- a confession of alignment towards the Patriots’ cause, even if Spain didn’t fully recognize the US as a nation until after peace negotiations in 1783.¹¹

Furthermore, the financial contributions that Spain granted under the Treaty of Aranjuez were also significant. It allowed many Spanish traders to open commerce without British tariffs, and many Spaniards took advantage. In particular, Don Diego de Gardoqui, a Basque trader based in Bilbao, Spain, began shipping supplies to the Americans. Accounts by Spanish traders tell that the House of Gardoqui furnished the colonists with “250 bronze cannons, 30,000 muskets, 30,000 bayonets, 512, 314 musket balls, 300,000 pounds of powder...” over three years.¹² All these supplies were critical to maintaining the war efforts undertaken by the Patriots, as Washington himself described his troops as “a motley crew, with no uniform, broken rifles, and neither the gunpowder nor the weapons to engage with Britain’s professional troops...”¹³ Though many of these wartime supplies were delivered on ships via Europe, the far simpler method was to haul the weapons through Texas and across to the Colonies.

Another way that Spain provided critical support to the Colonies was through wartime loans. Specifically, the Spanish were the main financiers of the final battle of the American Revolution, the Siege of Yorktown. King Charles III of Spain provided more than 500,000 reales (silver coins) sent from Texas and Cuba on ships to New York City to pay for the guns and ammunition required for the final major battle of the Revolution, at Yorktown.¹⁴ Without the

¹¹ *The New Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations: Volume 1*

¹² *A Few Bloody Noses: The American Revolutionary War*

¹³ [Diego María de Gardoqui y Arriquíbar \(1735-1789\) · George Washington's Mount Vernon](#)

¹⁴ [Three things you didn't know about the American Revolution \(rochester.edu\)](#)

critical Spanish funding, the siege would've dragged on much longer and possibly ended in a Continental Army defeat. Of course, Spain wasn't sending supplies to America; it was sending supplies to allied French troops besieging Yorktown (which may or may not have shared those supplies with the Americans). Given the delicate nature of European politics at the time, this roundabout solution was paramount.

To have a chance at putting down the rebellion, Britain would have to recall troops from many theaters of war. However, the Treaty of Aranjuez prevented significant troop consolidation in Europe. Though Britain itself was an island, it had many Mediterranean possessions. Under the 3rd clause of the Treaty of Aranjuez, Spain, and France would work together to retake Gibraltar and Menorca, which had been a Spanish territory for centuries, before being swiped by the English in 1704 (War of the Spanish Succession).¹⁵ In June of 1779, Spain began the Great Siege of Gibraltar, which would last for the next 3 years. Interestingly, the siege was the largest battle during the Revolutionary War [in terms of combatants] despite being fought thousands of miles from America.¹⁶ Spain's cannons and ships prevented thousands of British troops from reinforcing positions on the North American continent, allowing Continental victories to continue.¹⁷ Spain would reconquer the Island of Menorca in 1783, just before the Peace of Paris that ended the Revolutionary War.

Britain was the greatest naval power in the world at the time of the Revolutionary War. Given that most of the colonial cities were located near the coast, such as Charleston, New York, or Boston, it was very difficult for the colonists to repel the British Royal Navy bombardments. France's navy was strong, but had been devastated by the previous Seven Years' War, and was no

¹⁵ [Luis de Córdoba y Córdoba | Real Academia de la Historia \(rah.es\)](https://rah.es/)

¹⁶ *Britain and France at the Birth of America: The European Powers and the Peace Negotiations of 1782–1783*. University of Exeter Press

¹⁷ *Historia de Gibraltar y de su campo* (in Spanish)

match for the British Royal Navy. The Spanish navy, headed by Luis de Cordova, had many bases near the conflict zone, with hundreds of warships ready for action. With the Treaty of Aranjuez, the combined Spanish and French navies were able to overpower the English navy. Going back to the siege of Yorktown, the British encampment was guarded by 54 British warships, larger than the entire American navy at the time. The French also were spread extremely thin, fighting in New England, the Great Lakes, and the Mediterranean fronts. However, the Spanish again saved the day for the Americans. King Charles III's agent, Francisco Saavedra de Sangronis, had a massive fleet of frigates in Hispaniola and off the coast of Texas. When the French Admiral Comte de Grasse was out of resources and men, Sangronis gave him a detachment of 20 ships to escort his supply vessels to Yorktown, and in the process, annihilated a British fleet that would've relieved Cornwallis, whose troops were under siege there. De Grasse's arrival came just when the Americans and French would've had to abandon the siege due to a lack of supplies.¹⁸

To grow into the powerful nation it would become, the United States would need more clout. France and Britain were natural enemies, and so it was expected that France would ally with Britain's enemy. However, many others, particularly in inland Europe, believed that another power acknowledging America [even if not formally], would legitimize the new United States of America. This recognition was crucial to building the strength of the new country. The needed recognition was formalized by the Treaty of Paris in 1783, but informally by the Treaty of Aranjuez.

Despite the many belligerents who took part in the American Revolutionary War, not many were as underrepresented as Spain. Through Spanish Texas and the Caribbean islands,

¹⁸ [French fleet arrives at the Chesapeake Bay - On This Day - August 30, 1781 \(revolutionary-war-and-beyond.com\)](http://revolutionary-war-and-beyond.com)

Spain broke British defenses in the South, while providing financial aid and support to the outgunned Continentals, and protecting American allies with their strong navy. All of the cooperation between Spain, France, and the new Union was made possible by the 1779 Treaty of Aranjuez, bringing Spain into the Revolutionary War on the side of the colonies. Given how crucial this aid was to ensuring a Continental victory and the foundation of the United States of America, now the strongest nation in the world, the Treaty of Aranjuez was a massive turning point in history.

Process Paper

Finding sources for an event that took place nearly 250 years ago, while in itself being sidelined with more mainstream takes on said event is difficult. However, when digging deeper, there's a wealth of information about Spain's involvement in the Revolutionary War that's often simply out of reach to most researchers, along with more contemporary sources.

I had no preconceived notions of any of the topics researched, but several events transpired to incentivize this area of study. I hold a key interest in Texan, American, and Spanish history, and wanted to know more about its early history, and stumbled upon an amazing source by the Journal of the American Revolution that explains how Texas played a key role (as a part of New Spain), critical to jump-starting my research. Given that the Texas region and the whole Spanish Empire predominantly spoke Spanish, it's challenging to locate and verify sources in English about the topic of Spanish involvement, because American schoolchildren were not their intended audience. However, I am fluent in Spanish, and so I found many useful sources in Spanish at the Texas A&M Library.

Many places in which the Anglo-Spanish War started with the Treaty of Aranjuez (1779) are quite open with their history, and I found many sites from local museums, parks, or exhibits explaining how exactly their locale was important to events that took place during that period. Additionally, many history-centered publications released relevant information on the topic that I incorporated into my paper, especially European newsletters and historical tribunes. The Treaty of Aranjuez itself had been digitized and recreated in a PDF format online, which I used as a basic reference.

I wrote the paper itself on a computer using the Google Docs software. I did not have any outside help from others, as this was a solo project. I thoroughly enjoyed the process as it

combined many fields of history that I am interested in and have prior knowledge about, as well as what has importance in my upcoming academic career.

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