Introduction

In August 1947 Generalissimo Francisco Franco sat down for an interview with conservative American writer Merwin K. Hart, whom Franco periodically utilized as a message transmitter in the US media. The Spanish dictator received Hart at his summer residence in San Sebastian, a cool northern coastal Spanish refuge from Madrid’s oppressive summer heat. Attired in mufti for the occasion—a neatly tailored gray business suit with conspicuously well-polished tan leather shoes—Franco’s mien as he spoke with Hart was reminiscent of “any ordinary well-dressed European businessman.” Building on the US charm offensive he had begun a year earlier with the interviews he had conducted with the Associated Press’s DeWitt MacKenzie, Franco affected a “simple, earnest, unaffected, modest, friendly” demeanor as he made his latest pitch for US–Spanish reconciliation and alliance. A central element of his message concerned tourism: Hart offered the Jefe del Estado the set-up question, “Would the people of Spain like to have Americans visit Spain in considerable numbers?” Franco replied enthusiastically, “Very much. The Spanish people are an hospitable people who preserve their customs, traditions and famous monuments of the different civilizations which clashed in Spain.” He waxed on, sounding more like a travel agent than an autocrat, “The variety of its climate and its natural beauties, as well as the contrast of the tranquility of its life and the kindness of its inhabitants, make Spain much loved by all foreigners who visit it[.]”

Francisco Franco’s warm invitation to Americans revealed his perception of the high value of US tourism to Spain. His solicitation was a harbinger of the consistent support his regime would offer to promotion of American travel to his country through the end of the 1960s. As we will see, in the postwar era Franco was strongly encouraged to look to American tourism’s potential reputation-building as well as economic benefits to Spain by prominent players within the US travel and tourism industries, including American Express, Hilton Hotels, Trans-World Airlines and Temple Fielding.
Franco Sells Spain to America

the most popular American travel writer in the early postwar decades. But Franco was easily, quickly and completely persuaded, and thus the program to develop US tourism to Spain would be a consistent priority for the Franco regime, with promotion expenditures eventually reaching many millions of dollars; and Franco would shield the effort from a figure as powerful and persuasive as Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco, his closest advisor, who was fiercely loyal to El Caudillo but saw the influx of Americans, as well as of Northern Europeans, as a threat to the dictatorship’s control.

The American tourist presence in Spain was always, to be sure, a numerical minority, and the phenomenon of low-spending but proximate Northern Europeans (the British in particular were notoriously thrifty) who flocked to Spain’s sunny beaches as a respite from cool and gray home climates, once archly described by the Spanish writer Mario Gaviria as España a Go-Go, would be a critical factor in the loosening of Spanish social strictures. But much of the initial impetus for developing Spain’s modern foreign tourism infrastructure came from American travel industry exhortations and guidance, with modest additional input from the US government; and the record makes clear that even though Europeans eventually greatly outnumbered Americans traveling to Spain, the Franco regime consistently saw particular economic and political value in cultivating the new cohort of middle-class tourists from the world’s richest and most powerful nation.3

On an historiographical note, over the past decade a small but vital subfield concerning tourism as an element of international relations has developed,4 but as the American studies scholar Rob Kroes has asked, “What weight has [international tourism] as a force influencing people’s perceptions of other nations and other cultures?” In ruminating on his own question Kroes has asserted that “[t]he presence of huge colonies of people representing democratic Europe in Spain’s midst never much affected Franco’s hold on the Spanish political system until the day he died.”5 This claim is itself eminently arguable: as Spanish Ambassador to the US Pablo Merry del Val told a Chicago audience in 1966:

Imagine the 15 million tourists who visit our country every year (of whom in 1965 700,000 were Americans)—tourists not only attracted by a good climate and low prices, but also by the country itself, the cordiality of its people and its many historical and cultural treasures. They could not fail to leave their mark—and I do not mean just their currency.6

But the central issue is not how Franco Spain was affected by foreign tourism (although this is certainly not unimportant and the subject of a useful volume by Sasha D. Pack7), but rather how the dictatorship viewed and used this tourism as a means to its own ends in the international sphere. Franco Spain, although a country possessing a seemingly weak hand of cultural power relative to that of the US, sought with considerable success, by the metrics available at the time, to harness the power of American tourism as a key part