

THE NEUTRAL GROUND BETWEEN GIBRALTAR AND SPAIN

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The status of the territory between the North Front of The Rock and La Linea was settled militarily and diplomatically over 200 years ago.

In 1713, at the time of the cession of Gibraltar in perpetuity to the British Crown, various fortifications were established and occupied by British troops in the area which came to be known as 'the British Neutral Ground'. This was the area to the North of Gibraltar, militarily conquered and continuously occupied by the British except, during time of war.

After the Spanish attack (In Breach of Spain's written promise in the treaty of Utrecht) in 1727 was repulsed by the British, the treaty of Seville (1729) was the scene of long arguments between the Government of Spain and the United Kingdom as to how far North the 'undoubted right' of Britain extended from the North face of the Rock and it was finally accepted that a distance of 600 Toises, being more than 2 cannon shots distance between the British guns and the Spanish guns, would be considered 'the neutral ground', and so it continued thereafter.

[Editors Note: Paolo Narvaez Guarnieri defines a Toise as a unit equivalent to length of two arms. Equal to 1.949 meters]

After the 14th siege ended in 1783, the British resumed the occupation of the British half of the neutral ground, and at least since 1838, when permanent sentries were posted along the line of the then existing frontier, the entire area has been exclusively occupied and administered by the Gibraltar authorities.

In 1908 the British constructed a fence along 'the British edge of the neutral territory at Gibraltar' (actually, to avoid offending Spain it was put 1 metre inside the British territory) and, for reasons of courtesy, gave notice to the Government of Spain before doing so.

During the construction of the border fence, the Governor of Algeciras was instructed to complain that it was being built 'one or two metres in advance' of the British line, and he explained in his letter to the Governor of Gibraltar ' I should not have called your Excellency's attention were it not that such construction has gone beyond the line of British sentries'

As has often been the case, statements made by the Spanish Government are less than accurate and cannot be relied upon.

The British foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey had the matter looked into and in 1909 wrote to the Spanish ambassador in London to draw to his attention and request that he inform his Government in Madrid that 'It is perfectly clear ... that the fence ... will be entirely upon British territory'. The Spanish Government did not seek to argue the contrary and in any event gained 1 metre of the sovereign territory of Gibraltar, which they continue to occupy today.