

**Tourism, war and politics in elite beach resorts:
San Sebastian and Ostend, c. 1830-1939**

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The history of tourism has tended to prioritise economic and cultural issues, just as the dominant contributors to debate in the emergent 'discipline' of tourism studies have been economists, sociologists, anthropologists and practitioners of literary criticism/cultural studies. Questions of power, control, planning and conflict over resource allocation and use have not been ignored, but they have almost invariably been treated at the level of local government issues involving the politics of space, amenity and social tone in particular places¹. This is essential for the understanding of processes and outcomes (or rather moving frontiers) in tourist destinations, which have themselves been rather marginalized in a literature which shows more interest in travel, journeys and the processes of discovery and enjoyment, in the tourist as consumer, than in the changing nature of the places that are visited; but it is only part of the story. What is also needed is a grasp of the role resorts have sometimes played on the stage of national and international politics and diplomacy, and, in turn, the impact of national dynastic or party politics on the fortunes of the resorts themselves. This approach has sometimes been developed by local historians in the context of particular resorts, especially from the perspective of royal patronage; but comparative analysis of a wider range of themes on a broader stage is called for².

This paper aims to open out a set of neglected themes in the relationship between leisure towns (and specifically beach resorts) and national and international politics, through case-studies of two fashionable seaside resorts with real if fluctuating claims to be centres of international high society, especially in the later 19th and early 20th century: San Sebastian in the Basque Country of northern Spain, and Ostend on the Flemish-speaking North Sea coastline of Belgium. A national and international political agenda will be developed through the following themes, as we investigate the ways in which resort environments affected and were affected by external processes and outcomes: metropolitan debates over the importance of tourism in general and of these resorts in particular to national economies; the impact of wars; royal patronage and 'summer capital' status; and questions surrounding the legality and morality of resorts' provisions for their visitors, which were particularly fierce where casino gambling (and above all roulette) was at issue. These themes cannot be kept in watertight compartments, of course, and others could be pursued, most obviously the role of metropolitan political patronage in securing (or trying to secure) government assistance for projects helpful to resort interests and the roles played by the personalities of individual monarchs; but they provide a shape and direction for the argument. But we begin with a brief description of the case-study towns.

San Sebastian and Ostend constitute a useful comparative pairing because they marched closely in step in their development as towns and resorts during most of this period, and their trajectories tended to converge as time went on, apart from San Sebastian's continuing growth while Ostend stagnated in the 1920s and 1930s. In each case, too, royal patronage played a vital, sustained, active and interventionist role in the towns' development as resorts, giving central government a special interest in their development and identities which had had few parallels elsewhere in Europe, especially as royal visitors to French resorts after the advent of the Third Republic had to be imported from other parts of Europe and indeed beyond. San Sebastian and Ostend were both old fishing, commercial port and garrison towns which grafted sea-bathing and catering for visitors on to established economies which were stagnating or faltering, although Ostend began this process earlier (in the 1780s as opposed to the

1820s, although with many intervening years lost to European wars) and had more promising alternative options available at the crucial point in the mid-nineteenth century.

The Belgian resort was connected to Brussels by rail as early as 1838, partly at the behest of King Leopold I, who already looking after Ostend's interests; and a cross-Channel steamer service from Dover was opened in 1846, offering opportunities to tap the buoyant English sea-bathing market. In 1868 a direct rail link from Paris through West Flanders was also opened³. San Sebastian was a generation behind: the railway from Madrid did not open until 1864, there was no comparable passenger port development, and the distance from the capital and from other population centres was much longer, although there was also less competition at a time when cold northern seas were at a premium according to the prevailing medical orthodoxies about sea-bathing⁴. But the two emergent resorts lost their town walls, which symbolised an older, inward-looking, garrison mentality while imposing practical restraints on urban expansion, at almost exactly the same point. The demolition process began in San Sebastian in 1863, and was followed immediately by the spread of a municipally planned urban extension or *ensanche* on land where development had hitherto been forbidden or severely restricted by military requirements. Fashionable visitors were thus liberated from the constraints of what became the "old town" ("*parte vieja*"), which had itself been almost entirely rebuilt on a grid plan after the great fire of 1813, but on an unavoidable but dark and airless pattern of tall buildings and narrow streets⁵. Ostend, meanwhile, lost its corset of fortifications between 1865 and 1875, and the Minister of Finance instructed a government engineer to produce an urban extension plan for the state-owned land which had thus become available, although the actual development which began in 1874 was aimed more at maximising government income than at enhancing amenities. Those priorities came later; but even at this formative stage the transition from military use to urban development generated a politics of its own, which brought central and municipal government into controversial relations with each other and with local residents and interest-groups⁶.

The later 19th century saw substantial growth in both towns, founded increasingly (though far from exclusively) on catering for visitors. San Sebastian's resident population grew from just over 14000 in 1860 to more than 35000 in 1900, nearly 62000 in 1920 and nearly 90000 in 1935, while that of Ostend followed a similar trajectory, increasing from about 15000 in 1870 to nearly 45000 in 1910, before stagnating in the early 20th century and reaching 48000 in the early 1930s.⁷ These population figures put both towns close to the top of a notional European league of resorts, behind such giants as Brighton and Nice but well up in the second rank. Each would have won a place among the top ten English resorts at the beginning of the 20th century, while San Sebastian would have been the fifth resort in England, and Ostend the twelfth, on this measure in the early 1930s: a telling statistic when the English coastline had the world's most populous and specialized seaside resort system⁸. San Sebastian's steady growth was sustained over a longer period, but Ostend suffered from being in the front line during the First World War, while San Sebastian benefited from Spain's neutrality. Ostend was also hemmed in by rival resorts, forming part of a coastal urban system that ultimately covered most of the short Belgian littoral, whereas San Sebastian was more self-contained and had room to grow on either side of its river estuary⁹.

Visitor numbers are harder to assess, and the relationship between numbers, length of stay and spending power complicates statistics which are anyway notoriously "soft". Transport statistics are particularly problematic. A study of arrivals in Ostend would require an amalgamation of railway and steamboat figures, with serious risks of double counting and of including large numbers of travelers who merely passed directly between harbour and station as part of a longer journey. The extant passenger statistics for the *Norte* railway, which served San Sebastian, show that after 1879 it was the busiest station on the network (though far from being the largest town); but they do not permit desegregation of holidaymakers from other kinds of traffic flow, and the picture they present is complex and ultimately unconvincing. Recent historians of the resort have preferred alternative sources, the most promising of which, though still highly problematic, is San Sebastian's municipal

statistical record of visitor numbers, which was based on head-counts of arrivals and departures by train. According to these figures, which were reported daily in the local press and conserved carefully in the municipal archives, the resort had just over 13000 net visitor arrivals during the second half of August in 1890, between 18000 and 25000 during the first two decades of the 20th century, and well over 30000 in most of the years from 1919 onwards, apart from a brief dip during the mid-1920s as San Sebastian came to terms with the suppression of roulette in 1924. The receipts of the provincial entertainment tax for the town's shows and other commercial attractions tell a different story for the years between 1915 and 1932, more than doubling between 1915 and 1920 (and far outpacing the inflation of those years) before rising to a new plateau in the mid-1920s and picking up a new upward trend at the beginning of Spain's Second Republic, a pattern which suggests that the growing numbers of solid bourgeois visitors from Madrid and the rest of Spain, supplemented by (mainly) French and (the ubiquitous) British holidaymakers, were of more economic importance in the aggregate than the elite visitors who were enticed and agonised over by the municipality¹⁰.

Ostend, meanwhile, adopting a system based on visitor numbers per season rather than the setting of arrivals against departures, counted 9718 "étrangers" into its hotels in 1860, doubling to 20115 by 1872 and nearly doubling again to 38029 in the bumper season of 1890. An alternative, overlapping measure was the number of baths taken from the bathing-vans, which stood at 88795 in 1890 and fluctuated upwards to further peaks of 124217 in 1899, 138119 in 1906 and 163550 in 1911, when there were said to be 100000 staying visitors during the season. By 1937, however, the bathing statistics had fallen back to 138683, although this may reflect changing leisure preferences and bathing practices rather than actual visitor numbers¹¹. What stands out is the fragility of all these statistics, which need to be set against contemporary perceptions of a "golden age" at Ostend in the years before the First World War, and in San Sebastian during and just after that conflict, after which fashion was allegedly swamped by democracy and a new and (according to this perspective) inferior era set in. The San Sebastian statistics suggest that growing numbers brought their own compensations; the Ostend ones are more equivocal. What is quite clear is that these perceived golden years coincided with a role as summer capital which derived from royal patronage and attendant political activity, although in neither case is there a perfect fit: the heyday of royal influence in San Sebastian can perhaps be located a little earlier, around the turn of the century, before the young King Alfonso XIII came of age and became more fickle in his summer loyalties; while that of Ostend might be sought in a similar period, when King Leopold II was in his prime and taking a strong avuncular interest in the development of the resort he had chosen for his summer palace. We shall return to this theme.

To return to our agenda, however, the perceived national economic importance of tourism in these 'flagship' resorts takes precedence, and was already well to the fore in the later 19th century. In the first place, the Spanish and Belgian governments recognized the economic importance of these towns at an early stage, and historians have been much slower than contemporaries to pick this up. Elements in the Madrid press were already campaigning in the mid-1860s for Spaniards to take holidays in their own country, staunching the flow of currency into (especially) France; and in 1871 the fashionable Madrid daily *La Epoca* was already praising the part played by a rapidly-expanding San Sebastian in this desirable process, bringing back into Spain some of the fifteen million francs which were alleged to be spent each summer by Madrid families in Biarritz alone. Better still, traffic flows were being reversed as foreigners brought their holiday spending to San Sebastian, to the extent that rumours of epidemics in the Spanish resorts were being ascribed to propaganda on behalf of its French competitors north of the Bidasoa¹². The same newspaper was still pursuing this theme half a century later, however, although (in keeping with the national tourism policies which had emerged from the early 20th century) it was now emphasizing historical and artistic tourism as the way to make Spain more attractive both to its own citizens and to foreigners¹³. San Sebastian could be left to its own devices: its pioneering role in contributing to the tourism balance of payments passed into obscurity, and central government

enthusiasm was directed towards infrastructural improvements (especially road-building) and heritage tourism, especially in Madrid and Andalusia¹⁴.

Ostend sustained a higher profile in a much smaller country, although its importance as an individual resort was diluted by the urbanization of almost the whole of the short Belgian coastline, with Blankenberge and Knokke, successively and especially, emerging as rivals rather than mere satellites¹⁵. It also had to assert its importance with particular vehemence, first to gain access to the casino gambling on which its great national rival Spa held a government monopoly until 1878, and then to keep the privilege or secure appropriate compensation if it were suppressed¹⁶. We shall return to these themes, but the publicity generated by these conflicts over resources (casino gambling was required to contribute heavily to local government investment in tourism infrastructure) helps to explain the high visibility of tourism as an economic interest in Belgium. San Sebastian also lobbied central government over roulette, as we shall see, especially after the closure of its gaming-rooms in 1924, but to more limited overall effect.

The case for the national economic importance of Ostend was already being made by King Leopold II in 1885, when he told the Prime Minister that “the State has an interest in the prosperity of Ostend”. But it was asserted particularly forcefully during the conflicts over casino gambling in the early 20th century. The law professor E. Picard put the case briskly in 1906¹⁷:

“Ostend... attracts foreign visitors with their enormous quantities of cash, which is no less real and valuable for not featuring in the financial statistics. Switzerland, with its innumerable hotels, finds its main resources here. Their visits and journeys in our country are the basis for big business activities, for it is the world of powerful industrialists and merchants that now takes pride of place where formerly the aristocracy strutted. This flow, this infusion of healthy activity thus moves outwards from Ostend to spread over the whole country. Ask the experts, and they will bear witness to this advantage which is too often ignored.”

The Swiss comparison was a commonplace by this time, and was also popular in Spain¹⁸. The theme of tourism's economic importance was taken up at greater length in 1912 by Alexandre Gielen, whose *Ostende et Spa* carried as an epigraph the injunction “Working for their prosperity is contributing to that of the Nation”. He quoted approvingly from M. Verbeke’s contribution to a parliamentary debate, emphasizing the foreign currency brought in by Ostend’s visitors, the importance of its contribution to national tax receipts and post and telegraph revenues, the boost to Belgian industry and employment provided by its demand for building materials and furnishings, and the need to safeguard the borrowings undertaken on the security of Ostend property. He concluded, “Let us save Ostend and Spa for the prosperity of Belgium... let us follow the example of France, which attracts all the wealthy and fashionable foreigners to our detriment...” In this setting there was no danger of the importance of seaside tourism going by default, although we shall see that this perception did not free casino gambling from persisting controversy¹⁹.

Tourism and resorts were able to become so recognizably important to Western European economies between the Napoleonic Wars and the Second World War because of rising prosperity among expanding upper and middle classes, improving communications and the spread of the fashion cycle; but they were also helped by relative freedom from civil and international conflict, for one of the basic necessities for almost all kinds of tourist development is a sense of security of life and property. Improved policing and the spread of shared codes of civility were therefore also both essential to the tourism growth process and a response to its needs. War was inimical to tourism, although it could also divert it into different channels, favouring some destinations above others, and its aftermath might create new visitor destinations for the curious and commemorative. 19th century British resorts, for example, invariably benefited from European wars, as they restricted access to competitors and damaged places that were in the front line: a problem that only began to affect British coastal resorts

through German naval and air attacks in the First World War, and only made a serious impact when southern and eastern resorts acquired front-line status and were bombed, fortified and garrisoned in the Second World War. Wars were liable to make a direct and immediate impact on resorts, especially on the European mainland, and sometimes in complex and contradictory ways, as the examples of San Sebastian and Ostend illustrate²⁰.

San Sebastian's early career as a resort was both helped and hindered by local campaigns. It owed the rebuilding that made it easier to provide appropriate accommodation for the early sea-bathers of the 1830s and 1840s to the destructive fire that engulfed the town at the end of the siege of 1813, when British and Portuguese troops ran riot after driving out the French²¹. Subsequently, Spain stayed aloof from European conflicts, although this did not mean that she was always unaffected by them. What mattered much more to San Sebastian, however, was the interruptions to its 19th century growth which were imposed by the civil wars of the mid-1830s and mid-1870s, both of which saw the town surrounded by Carlist armies, besieged and cut off from a visiting public which would in any case have found temporary residence anything but pleasurable. The first Carlist war did no lasting damage to a domestic holiday market which was still in its infancy and had no serious internal competitors.

Even in the summer of 1836, with the war still in progress, a British visitor who had traveled by wherry from Biarritz was able to describe the bathing arrangements at first hand, and recovery was rapid²². The second conflict was a different matter. Its main focus was the Basque Country around San Sebastian and Bilbao, and it ruined the summer seasons of 1873-5 at a point when San Sebastian was growing rapidly and reaching out to new international markets, and when the Sardinero at Santander, on the north coast but beyond the war zone, was becoming a significant competitor in the domestic holiday market. A proposed international exhibition, aimed at putting San Sebastian firmly on the international tourist map, had to be abandoned, and the town was shelled repeatedly by Carlist artillery. Although recovery after the war was swift, its legacy of uneasy relations between central government and the Basque provinces made for occasional political turbulence, as the Basques were deprived of the full measure of fiscal and other exemptions which had been accorded by their *fueros*. The Sagasta riot of 1893, which attracted adverse publicity and brought the season to a premature close, was the most dramatic consequence in the medium term. Carlist interference with travel between San Sebastian and the border also produced a damaging mythology of banditry which was still being reproduced in English guidebooks a generation later. All this helped to delay the full emergence of San Sebastian as an international health and pleasure resort, in contrast with developments a few kilometres across the French border at Biarritz²³.

Spanish colonial wars also had intermittent adverse effects on San Sebastian. The disastrous defeats in the Spanish-American war of 1898 kept the royal family in Madrid, instead of enjoying the customary long summer visit, and the tone of local press reporting suggested doubts about the prosperity of the season and unease at sustaining festivities when soldiers were dying in distant territories. The season certainly started slowly, but the municipal visitor statistics suggested that it was more successful than those of the mid-1890s, although there were even more ambiguities than usual in the presentation of these unreliable data, and the 1898 season was to be eclipsed by that of 1899. This was probably more a crisis of morale and self-confidence than an actual dip in holiday demand²⁴. Spain's Moroccan campaigns of the early 1920s precipitated similar worries and doubts, as the seasons of 1921 and 1922 were allegedly damaged by the "sad events" in North Africa, although neither the municipal visitor statistics nor the local yield of the provincial entertainment tax confirmed this perception, and the fall of several foreign currencies (especially those of France and Portugal) against the peseta was also recognized as an important influence on holiday destination choices among the comfortably-off²⁵. Currency fluctuations were always important to the short-term fortunes of international resorts. When, in 1925, the *Gran Casino* (having lost its roulette the year before) was turned into a hospital for the wounded of the Moroccan war, this might be thought to expiate the sin of frivolity; but as in 1898, the impact of the war was more in the mind than the pocket²⁶.

The First World War posed problems for San Sebastian; but here the balance of outcomes was overwhelmingly beneficial, in striking contrast to the position in Ostend. After initial problems as French and German workers departed to become combatants and returning Spaniards had to be supported, San Sebastian reaped the benefits as competitors were put out of action. Its casino, racecourse and Victoria Eugenia theatre, supported by the recent completion of one of Europe's great hotels in the form of the Maria Cristina, enabled it to play host to international high society, while the loyalty of its Spanish clientele was forcibly reinforced by the temporary inaccessibility of Biarritz and its satellites. As the summer capital of a neutral country, too, it seethed with intrigue, while it was able to attract shows which would normally have been reserved for more established international centres, from the *Ballets Russes* downwards. All this built on pre-war investment and publicity, and it coexisted with mounting problems of industrial unrest and struggles against rising prices in these inflationary years; but on balance this was an impressive example of a resort town gaining by others' misfortunes, reinforced by the publicity which was provided by the visit of the League of Nations in 1920²⁷.

The privileged nature of San Sebastian's position was underlined by the trauma endured by Ostend, which, after avoiding the problems that San Sebastian had experienced through the 19th century, found itself right in the front line during the First World War. The practical consequences were summed up by a local newspaper: 211 inhabitants killed, 495 seriously wounded, 440 houses destroyed and 770 badly damaged, and an estimated loss to the town of 63 million francs. Moreover, a high proportion of pre-war holidaymakers had been Germans, who were no longer welcome, and the holiday season had to be reconstructed under difficult circumstances²⁸.

What was remarkable about Ostend was the speed with which it adjusted to the post-war world and resumed its role as international beach resort. This was not a straightforward matter: it moved down market, depending more heavily on the Belgian and English provincial middle classes and losing much of the high society patronage it had enjoyed before the war, as the focal points of fashion moved further south. The problematic status of casino gambling, an issue that spanned the war years, was important here, as we shall see, and so was the loss of royal patronage. On the other hand, the aftermath of the war offered economic advantages, as "battlefield tourism" developed around the First World War battles and graveyards (building on the earlier fame of the Battle of Waterloo), and Ostend became a jumping-off point for tours which combined conventional holiday pleasures with commemoration, mourning and a kind of nostalgia²⁹. These were attributes San Sebastian lacked, as it also grappled with the declining importance of royal patronage and saw its (in this case) wartime status as high society resort fading away in the post-war years, while casino gambling was suppressed and competition from the rising resorts of the Mediterranean, especially in France, affected both resorts, just as it played its part in democratizing Biarritz in the 1930s, where there were more visitors but staying for shorter periods³⁰. For Ostend and San Sebastian even the First World War, it seemed, was only a temporary (if highly problematic) interruption in the working out of wider trends. The Russian Revolution, and the Wall Street crash of 1929, were probably more significant, removing as they did substantial numbers of big spenders from the international holiday market. Still more important, perhaps, was the theme of royal patronage.

Regular visits from royalty were essential to the credibility and economic well-being of resorts across Europe. Royal patronage was less important in Britain after the formative years of the late 18th and early 19th century, as Queen Victoria's preference for rural seclusion put Balmoral, Sandringham and Osborne House ahead of Brighton or Weymouth. Paradoxically, perhaps, it was more important in France, despite the coming of the Third Republic in 1870, which deprived Biarritz of its imperial patron. In many countries, however, relationships between monarchs and individual resorts became established, with summer palaces being built, the court moving to the seaside for the season, and resorts acquiring the status of "summer capital". This was the case in Spain, with San Sebastian, and Belgium, with Ostend; and in each setting the royal presence had a profound impact on the way the resort developed.

Ostend's relationship with the Belgian royal family was particularly lasting and intimate. Leopold I came to stay for the first time in 1834, having already experienced British seaside resorts; and he returned almost annually thereafter, putting his influence behind the opening of the mailboat service and the early arrival of the railway³¹. But the important influence was Leopold II, who from his accession in 1865 "dreamed of making the town into a bathing-resort of international reputation", and brought the crowned heads of Europe to enjoy it: Queen Victoria, the German Kaiser, Russian Grand Dukes and Austrian Archdukes. He acquired the label "Ostend's most faithful visitor", and accepted it with pride. Leopold fixed the site of his Ostend palace among the dunes to the west of the town, and developed elaborate plans for urban extensions and amenities, a field in which he had a particular interest. Between 1885 and his death in 1909 he oversaw the development of new streets and parks around the palace, supplementing his own resources with the revenues from his colony in the Congo, which until 1906 was a personal fiefdom of the Belgian Crown, and also looking for support from the Belgian government, not only in terms of surplus land from the demolition of the town fortifications, but also through direct investment. From the late 1880s his demands met resistance from Prime Minister Beernaert, and when in 1891 the king tried to make his signing of a new law on legal reform conditional on government financial support for the next stage of his dunes development project, he was threatened with the principled resignation of the entire cabinet. A further development scheme, involving a British financier who was also involved in Leopold's Congo schemes, generated fierce parliamentary opposition, and the role of Ostend issues in Belgian national politics was clearly quite significant. Increasingly, the king used his Congo income to support his Ostend projects, in effect exploiting African slave labour to expand and improve an elite resort, in a new twist to the literature on the relationships between colonies and metropolis; and when the Congo was transferred from the Crown to the State in 1906 he lobbied hard, but unavailingly, to get 20 million francs allocated to the Ostend project as part of the settlement. Here was a particularly close relationship between high – and international – politics and resort development³².

After Leopold's death, however, Ostend suffered from the vagaries of royal tastes and preferences. Albert I, his successor, preferred the smaller resort of De Panne, and eventually followed the inter-war fashion eastwards down the coast to Knokke-le-Zoute, where his own royal residence was built³³. As Biarritz had already found, and as San Sebastian was also to discover, dependence on the personal preferences of individual monarchs was a difficult strategy to sustain from one generation to the next.

From its earliest days as a resort, San Sebastian had benefited from intermittent royal patronage, especially from Queen Isabella II; and as part of his efforts to gain acceptance in Spain the imported king Amadeus of Savoy had paid an extended visit in 1872, although the partisan nature of the press reports make it difficult to gauge his reception³⁴. Much more important than any of this was the relationship forged with the town by the Queen Regent, Maria Cristina, who spent every summer there from 1887 to her death in 1929, with the sole exception of 1898, the year of the Spanish-American War. Spain's turbulent dynastic politics lay behind this development, making up for the disruption they had caused through the Carlist wars. King Alfonso XII had died while his son and heir was in the womb, and Alfonso XIII was literally born a king. The line of succession which had been restored in 1876, after eight years of assorted tottering regimes, depended on his survival; and San Sebastian's safe and sheltered La Concha beach was chosen for his health-giving summer bathing regime. A royal residence, the Miramar Palace, was built at the end of La Concha, and the royal family became a tourist attraction, although carefully protected from molestation. The goodwill associated with this annual and extended royal visit to the Basque Country, which was calculated to form bonds and reduce the tensions over the lost *fueros* and, by the turn of the century, the rise of Basque nationalism, was also significant. San Sebastian reaped many benefits from the annual arrival of court, household cavalry, politicians (who needed to plot their coalitions in conversation parties on the beaches) and the diplomatic corps, as it acquired the lucrative status of summer capital. In return, its municipality provided ostentatious and carefully-orchestrated displays of loyalty, some of which (especially the

various proposals for statues in her honour) moved the Queen to protest; but she was always eager to get involved in local charitable activity, her willingness to learn a few courtesy words of Basque eased emergent local tensions, and even the local republican press treated her with immense personal respect³⁵.

But this was not an exciting regime; and when Alfonso XIII grew up, married and began to seek new experiences, and in 1913 the rival resort of Santander offered him a specially-built palace on the Magdalena peninsula, the royal presence became less pervasive, although the continuing status of summer capital was what mattered most³⁶. The San Sebastian press columnist Mariano Benlliure y Tuero, writing in 1922, was well aware that the simple presence of royalty was no longer enough: the glamour had to be tangible. As he remarked, the visit of the Argentine President Marcelo Alvear was all very well, but presidential status lent a *gravitas* which inhibited playboy tendencies and excitement, and for maximum publicity and allure the town needed “a young, elegant, worldly and sport-minded monarch or prince”. Such a comment pointed up the loss of Alfonso XIII as a regular summer presence, and the disadvantages of the staid respectability of his mother’s court³⁷. Alfonso himself retained an affectionate interest in San Sebastian, and regularly paid short visits, especially to celebrate his mother’s birthday. He also took an interest in new developments, especially those involving motoring, and in 1925 he advocated heavy investment in new roads in and around the town to encourage “that elegant mass of cosmopolitan tourists in which I have always been interested.”³⁸ But these insubstantial words were a far cry from Leopold II’s sustained commitment of interest and resources to the expansion of Ostend; and despite the enduring importance of the royal presence, San Sebastian's growth had been sustained by an effective alliance between a very active municipality and private enterprise.

After Maria Cristina's death in 1929 San Sebastian adjusted rapidly to the royal absence. The Pact of San Sebastian of 17 August 1930, which established the electoral coalition that precipitated the Second Republic in 1931, was commemorated in that year by a Republican festival at the height of the season, and the municipality was quick to invite the government to continue San Sebastian’s tradition as summer capital. This was not plain sailing, and attempts to bring ministers to San Sebastian for national-level festivities in 1931 were frustrated by occult political manoeuvres in Madrid; but the ease with which San Sebastian transformed itself from recipient of royal patronage to Republican stronghold was revealing, and probably helps to explain its sustained growth into the 1930s, until the outbreak of the Civil War at the start of the 1936 season put everything on hold³⁹.

The negotiations in Madrid about commemorating the Pact of San Sebastian were complicated because the mayor was also seeking the revival of casino gambling, which had been abolished by the authoritarian regime of Primo de Rivera in 1924, and he may have seemed to be asking for too much. The legality and moral acceptability of roulette was a political question of long standing in both San Sebastian and Ostend, as it was in much of Western Europe (though not in Britain, where roulette was simply unthinkable at this time). In San Sebastian the issue was complicated by the presence during the season of Queen Maria Cristina, who disapproved; and the complexity of the legal position makes actual practices difficult to unravel before the imposition of formal prohibition⁴⁰.

The relationship between casino gambling and the law in Spain, and perhaps especially in San Sebastian, was enduringly equivocal. The journalist A. Gallenga provided a revealing contemporary perception of early developments in San Sebastian during the First Republic⁴¹:

“I happened to be in Madrid when some gentry belonging to the Dupressoir tribe (i.e. the international roulette fraternity) solicited from Prim, in 1869, permission to set up a roulette at St Sebastian, and they plied the general, or the persons about him, with such good 'sporting' arguments that the game was, not indeed actually legalised, but 'tolerated'. Since then the more virtuous or less-tempted Republicans of the Figueras or Catelar school have withdrawn all toleration and issued fresh decrees enforcing the law with the utmost strictness.”

Three years later the San Sebastian correspondent of *La Epoca* described the operation of the town's two casinos, the Indo and the Kursaal, which were exactly like those at (for example) Baden and Homburg. Entry was free, music and dancing could be enjoyed, and the casinos made their money from the upstairs gaming tables, where a young man from Bilbao had recently broken the bank. But within a month, in August, information had come through that the Justice Minister had had to put pressure on a local official to do his duty and act against the gaming-houses that "with the tacit agreement of the local authorities, operate publicly in the capital of Guipuzcoa."⁴² This alternation between tolerance, threat and suppression continued for more than half a century. The commercial operation of a roulette wheel was a felony, but it was systematically ignored for most of the time. The *Gran Casino*, "*Nuestra Senora de la Ruleta*", which opened in sumptuous premises in 1887, found its gambling activities interrupted at regular intervals, usually as the outcome of local political struggles; but it was too closely linked with leading local citizens, and ploughed too much money back into the municipal coffers, directly and indirectly, in support of sport, entertainment and poor relief, for permanent suppression to be a genuine local option. It was also far too attractive to the high society visitors the town sought to attract and retain, against competition from (especially) Biarritz; and although it was vulnerable to attack on moral grounds, it proved remarkably durable through the carefully-choreographed changes of government of the Restoration period. In 1922, indeed, a second and even more luxurious casino, the *Gran Kursaal*, opened in the town. It took the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera to impose closure, in 1924; and for the next twelve years a dominant concern of the town's tradesmen and political elite was the return of roulette, which was equated with the prosperity which persistent local legend attached to the war years. There were opponents among San Sebastian's Catholic moralists and puritan nationalists; but a persistent yearning for the return of roulette pervaded the mainstream media, and was a central theme of the political interaction between the municipality and Madrid in this period⁴³.

These issues were also contentious in Ostend, where the Kursaal opened in 1878 after Spa's monopoly on legal gaming in Belgium had been broken and some unofficial roulette wheels suppressed. Opposition on moral grounds emerged in nearby Ghent and Bruges, and the gaming question was debated repeatedly in the Belgian Senate for more than a decade after 1896. Here again, morality was set against a public interest in local tax revenues and the attraction of visitors, but in this case the law remained ambiguous, and it proved impossible to sustain effective prohibition after the First World War. Revival came in 1922, after further animated debates in the Senate, and Ostend continued to offer roulette throughout the inter-war years⁴⁴. On the eve of the Second World War the casino at the Kursaal was still busily in operation, although the average stake had apparently declined as the biggest punters moved on⁴⁵.

"The Kursaal room is enormous. Five or six roulette tables are always running, and at least fifteen baccarat tables. You meet here all manners of people. Some obviously hard up, trying to win a twenty-franc piece or two; others playing in one 'coup' from 50 to 100000 francs... The spirit of the gambling-rooms remains the same, but the stakes are much smaller. It is even possible to play with a capital of ten francs..."

Belgium's contested eventual tolerance of gambling may have helped to keep Ostend afloat during the difficult inter-war years, but it clearly did not bring prosperity all by itself, just as the loss of roulette in San Sebastian in 1924 seems to have been much less damaging to the town's economy (as opposed to the gambling enterprises and the municipal tax yield) than mainstream contemporary opinion suggested. Roulette was more a focus of highly-charged argument, engaging religion, authority, self-interest and power, than the guaranteed recipe for economic success that its proponents claimed, as the contrasting fortunes of San Sebastian and Ostend from the mid-1920s seem to suggest.

What these examples show, however, is the reciprocal importance of national, and sometimes international, politics to European resorts, and of resorts to the agenda of politics, from the moral and

fiscal to the dynastic and diplomatic. The study of seaside resorts can, and should, take us beyond economic, social and cultural history, and related themes in local politics, to open out additional questions on a broader and more traditional historical stage⁴⁶. The resorts discussed here were emphatically not “places on the margin”, in Rob Shields’ ultimately dismissive phrase⁴⁷. They were fully imbricated in wider economic and political systems, and their role deserves a much more sustained investigation than it has so far received. These are important themes.

¹ Attempts to paint on a broader canvas include N. MORGAN and A. PRITCHARD, *Power and politics at the seaside*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1999; J.K. WALTON, *The British seaside: holidays and resorts in the twentieth century*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, Chapter 7.

² E.W. GILBERT, *Brighton: old ocean's bauble*, Brighton Flare Books, 1975 (originally published 1954), pp. 89-97; L. RODRIGUEZ ALCALDE, *Cronica del veraneo regio*, Santander, Estudio, 1991.

³ P. FLORIZOONE, *James Ensor: les bains a Ostende*, Brussels, Snoeck-Ducajou et Zoon, 1996, pp. 19-20.

⁴ J.K. WALTON and J. SMITH, “The first century of beach tourism in Spain: San Sebastian and the 'playas del norte', from the 1830s to the 1930s” in M. BARKE et al. (eds.), *Tourism in Spain: critical issues*, Wallingford, CAB, 1996, pp. 36-40.

⁵ M.J. CALVO SANCHEZ, *Crecimiento y estructura urbana de San Sebastian*, San Sebastian, Dr Camino, 1983.

⁶ Galerie CGER, *Histoire d'Eaux*, Brussels: Galerie CGER, 1987, pp. 181-4.

⁷ M. GARATE OJANGUREN and J. MARTIN RUDI, *Cien anos de la vida economica de San Sebastian*, San Sebastian, Dr Camino, 1995, pp. 27-31; *Ostende: la reine des plages (Belgique)*, Ostend, 1911, p. 8; E.-L. TILLION (ed.), *Les Guides Bleus: Belgique et Luxembourg*, Paris, Hachette, 1935, p. 185.

⁸ J.K. WALTON, “The seaside resorts of England and Wales, 1900-1950” in G. SHAW and A. WILLIAMS (eds.), *The rise and fall of British coastal resorts*, London, Pinter, 1997, p. 27.

⁹ *La Saison d'Ostende*, 15 June 1919; J.K. WALTON, “Leisure towns in wartime: the impact of the First World War in Blackpool and San Sebastian” in *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, 1996, pp. 603-18; J.K. WALTON, “The seaside resorts of Western Europe, 1750-1939” in S. FISHER (ed.), *Recreation and the sea*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1997, pp. 46-8.

¹⁰ A. VALERO, “Chemin de fer et tourisme : l'exemple de Norte Principal (1877-1930)” in *Melanges de la Casa de Velazquez* 27, 1991, pp. 18-20, 42; M. GARATE OJANGUREN and J. MARTIN RUDI, *Cien anos, op. cit.*, p. 308; L. CASTELLS, “La Bella Easo: 1864-1936” in M. ARTOLA (ed.), *Historia de Donostia/San Sebastian*, San Sebastian, Nerea, 2000; J.K. WALTON and J. SMITH, “First century”, *art. cit.*, pp. 43, 49-51.

¹¹ P. FLORIZOONE, *James Ensor, op. cit.*, pp. 23, 144-5; *La Saison d'Ostende*, 2 Sept. 1911; Galeries CGER, *Histoire d'Eaux*, p. 296.

¹² *La Epoca*, 20 and 24 July 1871.

¹³ *La Epoca*, 14 August 1925.

¹⁴ *El Nervion*, 9 October 1905, 21 October 1910.

¹⁵ Galerie CGER, *Histoire d'Eaux*, pp. 271-306.

¹⁶ P. FLORIZOONE, *James Ensor, op. cit.*, p. 154.

¹⁷ L. RANIERI, *Leopold II: urbaniste*, Brussels, Hayez, 1973, p. 223; E. PICARD, *Ostende et la nouvelle loi des jeux*, Brussels, 1906, p. 59.

¹⁸ *El Nervion*, 4 June 1908, 25 August 1910.

¹⁹ Alexandre GIELEN, *Ostende et Spa*, Brussels, 1912, pp. 106-16, 237, 243.

²⁰ J.K. WALTON, “Leisure towns in wartime” in *idem.*, *The British seaside, op. cit.*, pp. 155-6.

- ²¹ M. ARTOLA, *Historia de la reconstrucción de San Sebastian*, San Sebastian, Ayuntamiento, 1963; C. APARICIO PEREZ, *Poder municipal, economía y sociedad en la ciudad de San Sebastian (1813-1855)*, San Sebastian, Dr Camino, 1991.
- ²² F.W. VAUX, *Rambles in the Pyrenees and a visit to San Sebastian*, London, 1838, pp. 168-9, 173-6, 185-6.
- ²³ Archivo General de Gipuzkoa, DM IDM SS 67; *La Epoca*, 7 July to 16 August 1873; *El Diario de San Sebastian*, 18 July 1876.
- ²⁴ *La Union Vascongada*, 6, 11, 16, 17 July, 15-17 August 1898; B. ANABITARTE, *Gestion municipal de San Sebastian, 1894-1900*, San Sebastian, Caja de Ahorros Municipal, 1974, p. 212.
- ²⁵ *El Pueblo Vasco*, 25 August 1922; B. ANABITARTE, *Gestion del municipio de San Sebastian*, San Sebastian, Caja de Ahorros Municipal, 1971, pp. 210-11; J.K. WALTON and J. SMITH, "First century" *art. cit.*, p. 50.
- ²⁶ *La Epoca*, 20 July, 16 September 1925.
- ²⁷ J.K. WALTON, "Leisure towns in wartime" *art. cit.*
- ²⁸ *La Saison d'Ostende*, 15 June 1919.
- ²⁹ Galeries CGER, *Histoire d'Eaux*, p. 295.
- ³⁰ M. CHADEFAUD, *Aux origines du tourisme dans les pays de l'Adour*, Pau, 1987, pp. 373-7.
- ³¹ Galerie CGER, *Histoire d'Eaux*, p. 293; L. RANIERI, *Leopold II*, *op. cit.*, p. 209.
- ³² Galerie CGER, *Histoire d'Eaux*, p. 295; L. RANIERI, *Leopold II*, *op. cit.*, pp. 223-56; M. CONSTANDT, *Een eeuw vakantie: 100 jaar toerisme in West-Vlaanderen*, Tielt, 1986, p. 59.
- ³³ M. CONSTANDT, *Vakantie*, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60.
- ³⁴ *La Epoca*, 7 and 12 August 1872.
- ³⁵ J.K. WALTON and J. SMITH, "First century" *art. cit.*, p. 45.
- ³⁶ L. RODRIGUEZ ALCALDE, *Cronicas*, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-33.
- ³⁷ *El Pueblo Vasco*, 30 August 1922.
- ³⁸ *La Epoca*, 28 July 1925.
- ³⁹ *La Voz de Guipuzcoa*, 27 May, 19 July- 19 August 1931.
- ⁴⁰ *La Voz de Guipuzcoa*, 28 April 1931.
- ⁴¹ A. GALLENGA, *Iberian reminiscences: fifteen years' travelling impressions of Spain and Portugal*, London, Chapman and Hall, 1883, Vol. 1, pp. 338-9.
- ⁴² *La Epoca*, 18 July, 12 August 1872.
- ⁴³ J.M. SADA and T. HERNANDEZ, *Historia de los casinos de San Sebastian*, San Sebastian, Nuevo Gran Casino del Kursaal, 1987; and see *La Voz de Guipuzcoa*, 8 August 1918, for some of the issues involved.
- ⁴⁴ *La Saison d'Ostende et du Littoral*, 18 September 1921; and see above, notes 17 and 19.
- ⁴⁵ Eugene FODOR (ed.), *1938 in Europe*, London, W. Aldor, 1938, Vol. 2, pp. 765-6.
- ⁴⁶ See also Mary BLUME, *Cote d'Azur*, London, 1992.
- ⁴⁷ R. SHIELDS, *Places on the margin*, London, 1991.