

The Spanish Civil War (1936—1939) [entry from *The Encyclopedia of the Great Depression and the New Deal*, ed. Dr. James F. Ciment (M.E. Sharpe, forthcoming).

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The Spanish Civil War can be seen a climactic event of the tumultuous 1930s, forming a bridge between the economic struggles and political activism of the Depression years and the looming Second World War. From its outset, the civil war in Spain aroused intense international reaction. Backward Spain with its turbulent political struggles had long aroused the imagination of both radicals and conservatives all over the world. Spain, with its recurrent civil wars and *coups d'état* throughout the Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries provided a sense of urgency to the sterile ideological debates of the rest of the world. With the overthrow of Spain's ailing monarchy and the declaration of the Second Spanish Republic in 1931, Spain became a powerful symbol for activists of all political persuasions; the outbreak of civil war galvanized opinion into intense international reaction.

The Spanish Civil War erupted on 18 July 1936 with a military uprising directed by a cabal of generals from which General Francisco Franco eventually emerged as supreme leader. On the surface the Spanish Civil War was a conflict between the rightist "Nationalist" rebels and the leftist "Republican" or "Loyalist" defenders of the established republican government of Spain. In truth, both sides were politically heterogeneous. The Nationalists included the Navarrese Carlists, ultraorthodox Catholic monarchists; the *Falange Espanola*, a semi-fascist party; and the rightist majority of the professional military. In addition, the Spanish Foreign Legion and the Moroccan troops of the colonial army fought on the Nationalist side. The Nationalists were able to unite in their common desire for a centralized authoritarian state preserving the old class system. They appealed to reaction and religion, justifying their cause in the name of Spanish nationalism and Catholic traditionalism. By contrast, the supporters of the Republic found themselves frequently working toward incompatible goals. Liberals and radicals, centralists and regionalists, libertarian Anarchists and authoritarian Communists all struggled to find a collective cause.

The Republicans had no positive unifying ideology--while they supported the Republic, the only ideological label they could agree on was "anti-fascist." The Loyalists' disunity would frequently lead to internal conflicts within the Republican camp, ultimately hampering the war effort.

Spain's protracted status as an impoverished, isolated state had long maintained an atmosphere of internal political turbulence, which was catalyzed by the importation of opposing European political philosophies of all stripes. In the 1930s, Spain's domestic scene included politically significant nationalist, regionalist, monarchist, anarchist, communist, fascist, and socialist groups. The conflict of ideas kept unrest brewing in Spain while also keeping Europeans intrigued with the Spanish situation. When civil war once again erupted in July of 1936, the international fascination with Spain quickly led the rest of the world to take an active interest in the conflict.

The clash of ideology in Europe played out on the Spanish stage. The interplay between the Soviet Union, Germany, Italy, and the Western democracies shaped the reactions of each to the Spanish Civil War. The opposing forces of Soviet communism and German-Italian fascism each had a significant stake in the outcome of the war, while the European democracies and the United States were more reluctant to take sides in the confusing struggle.

The war in Spain was important to the Soviet Union for a number of reasons. Worried by the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy in the mid-1930s, the Soviet Union attempted to strengthen its position by fashioning a strategy of collective security with France and Britain against the fascist nations. The 1935 treaty of cooperation with France, one of the USSR's few successes of collective security, might be rendered useless if France was threatened on three sides by fascist nations after a Nationalist victory in Spain. The war in Spain also presented some positive opportunities to the Soviets, for the Spanish conflict offered tangible proof of the fascist threat that could entice France and Britain into closer cooperation with the USSR. Stalin therefore chose to follow a very cautious policy toward

the Spanish Republic. Throughout the war the USSR provided the vast majority of the Republic's arms, but the Soviets refused to risk intervening sufficiently to make a decisive impact on the course of the war. In part, Soviet hesitation stemmed from a desire to avoid alarming the democracies with the specter of onrushing communist influence. Stalin had more Machiavellian underlying motives, however. The continuation of the conflict preserved Soviet freedom of action while producing an international situation that would increasingly threaten Britain and France's Mediterranean interests. In the best-case scenario, the Spanish war might erupt into a general war involving France, Britain, Italy and Germany, in which the Soviet Union could remain neutral and pick up the pieces afterward.¹

German motives for participation in the Spanish Civil War centered on strategic preparations for the coming general war. Hitler later said that he helped Franco in order, "to distract the attention of the western powers to Spain, and so enable German rearmament to continue unobserved." He also saw an opportunity to gain a fascist ally, "athwart the sea communications of Britain and France." The threat posed by a Nationalist Spain to the Franco-Soviet security agreement must also have occurred to the Germans. In addition, a Nationalist government in Spain would ensure German access to Spanish iron ore and other strategic minerals. From the Italian perspective, the Nationalists' appeal for help flattered Mussolini and offered potential gains for Italian security interests. On the heels of the Italian conquest of Abyssinia, Mussolini saw Spain as another chance for a low-risk martial adventure to shore up the glory of his New Rome and an opportunity to gain naval and air bases to challenge British control of the Western Mediterranean. Ultimately, the Spanish Civil War proved to be the factor that cemented the German-Italian alliance. While Mussolini had manifested a hostile attitude toward the "bourgeois" democracies, Italy's relations with Germany remained vague and undefined in 1936. In the air of heightened

¹Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, pp.338-340; Burnett Bolloten, The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p.109 [hereafter cited as Revolution and Counterrevolution]; Walter G. Krivitsky, In Stalin's Secret Service: An Exposé of Russia's Secret Policies by the Former Chief of Soviet Intelligence in Western Europe, Frederick, Maryland (University Publications of America, 1985) orig. pub.1939. pp.80-81

tension in Europe following the outbreak of war in Spain, however, Germany and Italy found themselves helping the same side and discovered sufficient mutual interest to form the Rome-Berlin Axis.

In sharp contrast to the Soviet Union, Germany, and Italy, which quickly intervened in the Spanish war, France and Britain both attempted to stay out of the conflict. The French Popular Front government of Leon Blum sympathized with the Republic and wanted to send weapons and aircraft, but British distaste for the conflict prevailed. Still weak from the First World War and alarmed by increasing German power, France relied on collective action with Britain to maintain its security and felt compelled to secure British support for any foreign policy initiatives. The British were reluctant to act in Spain because they had long been more concerned with the menace of communism than that of fascism. Britain's conservative governments appeased Hitler because they feared that destroying Nazi Germany would allow the Soviets to consolidate their strength, free of the greatest threat to their security. Eventually, unchecked Bolshevism might overcome all Europe. Accordingly, the British government felt little incentive to intervene in a Spanish conflict between a revolutionary Republic and authoritarian Nationalists.

To preserve unity of action with Britain, the French proposed a policy of "non-intervention" in which no arms sales or other help would be provided to either side in Spain. In practice, the Non-Intervention Agreement was a farce. The only intervention it prevented was potential French aid to the Republic, while war material and military personnel from Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union streamed into Spain.²

German and Italian arms began to pour into the Nationalist zone in July of 1936, followed later by combat troops. The Italian Corps of Volunteer Troops (CTV), ostensibly composed of volunteers but actually made up in large part of Fascist militia conscripts, reached a strength of fifty thousand men. About five thousand Italians served in the Italian "Legionary Air Force" in Spain. Mussolini also sent to Spain about 660 aircraft, 150 3-ton

² Beevor, The Spanish Civil War, pp.120-121; Thomas 395

Fiat-Ansaldo tanks, around 800 pieces of artillery, and a vast amount of other assorted ordnance. In addition, ninety-one Italian warships and submarines took part in the civil war.³ Germany sent the "Condor Legion" of approximately one hundred combat aircraft, supported by anti-aircraft, anti-tank and armored units. At the height of its strength, the Condor Legion totaled five thousand men and was equipped with the newest German equipment, including early models of the Messerschmitt 109 fighter and the rapid-fire 88 millimeter flak gun that would become famous in the Second World War.⁴

Fearful of alarming the democracies or provoking open hostility from Germany, Stalin nonetheless came to believe that Soviet interests in the preservation of the Republic required intervention by the USSR in violation of the Non-Intervention agreement. In contrast to the brazen participation of the Italians and the only slightly less obvious German presence, Stalin's caution and his interest in prolonging the war led to a more limited Soviet role in Spain.

The political and logistical problems behind large-scale commitment of Red Army ground troops led the Soviets to focus on more discreet intervention, primarily sending war material and military "advisors." While Stalin's desire to preserve a thin veneer of non-intervention slowed the flow of aid to the Republic, the scale of Soviet assistance to Loyalist Spain was nonetheless substantial, totaling 600–800 aircraft, around 350 tanks, 1200 to 1500 artillery pieces, 500,000 rifles, millions of rounds of artillery and small arms ammunition, and a variety of miscellaneous military equipment. Accompanying the Soviet war material was a substantial number of Soviet officials and military advisors. Though an anxious Stalin had admonished Red Army officers to "stay out of range of the artillery fire," Soviet advisors frequently took direct command of Republican forces in the heat of battle.

In addition, there were two Soviet combat units directly involved in the fighting. A Soviet armored unit of at least brigade strength comprised the bulk of the Republic's tank corps throughout the war. Likewise, a Soviet air unit composed of about 1,000 pilots and

³ Beevor, The Spanish Civil War, p.146; Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, pp.978-979

⁴ Thomas, The Spanish Civil War pp. 469-470

support personnel under the command of a Red Air Force general operated the Republic's Soviet-made aircraft. A Russian NKVD unit also traveled to Spain and was instrumental in the organization of the Republican political police apparatus, in addition to working behind the scenes to promote domination of the Loyalist government by the Spanish Communists.⁵

The creation of the International Brigades in the fall of 1936 was another element of Soviet aid to Spain. Rather than sending Soviet ground troops to Spain, Stalin took up the suggestion of European communist leaders that the Comintern actively recruit foreign volunteers to fight in Spain. Numerous foreigners were already fighting for the Republic, including several small all-foreign units. Approximately five thousand foreign volunteers fought for the Republic independent of its own army of foreigners, the International Brigades).⁶ While the exact date of the decision is unknown, the Comintern took the first steps in the formation of the International Brigades before the end of September.⁷

⁵ Beevor, The Spanish Civil War, p.123; Bolloten, Revolution and Counterrevolution, pp.315-316

⁶ Beevor, The Spanish Civil War, p.98, 106-107,124

⁷ Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, pp. 452. Vincent Brome, The International Brigades: Spain 1936-1939, London (Heinemann, 1965) pp.14-15; Robert Rosenstone, Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War, Lanham, Maryland (University Press of America, Inc., 1980 [first pub. 1969). p.87