

# THE GREAT PRELIMINARY BOUT —THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

BY ERIK NORLING AND GEORGE FOWLER

***The Spanish Civil War proved to be the momentous ideological and cultural flash point of the 1930s, striking deeply into the consciousness of the West. It represented the first armed confrontation between the form of nationalism that came to be called fascism and communism. To the respective banners rallied Western traditionalists, Catholics and non-fascist anti-communists of the right; liberal idealists, vague utopians and non-communist anti-fascists of the left. For the first time in European history, thousands of foreign volunteers rallied to face each other in a land strange to them.***

Alfonso XIII abandoned the Spanish throne in 1931. From 1923 until January 28, 1930 Spain was ruled by General Primo de Rivera's benevolent and traditionalist military dictatorship. Following considerable internal dissent, a Republican-Socialist coalition was elected on June 28, 1931. A single-chamber parliament (*Cortes*) began functioning under a new and liberal constitution.

Left-Communist influence grew in Madrid, and on January 6, 1936 the *Cortes* was dissolved. The leftist parties (Republican, Socialist, Syndicalist and Communist) combined to form a "Popular Front" totally unacceptable to

Spanish traditionalists. The Spanish Civil War began in effect on July 18, 1936 with an army revolt at Melilla in Spanish Morocco.

The revolt spread rapidly to Spain's garrison cities and towns, such as Cadiz, Seville, Saragossa and Burgos. The parties of the left, already strongly influenced by Soviet and international Communist pressures and support, united to resist the rightist uprising. Antagonisms were heightened by the Republican government's confiscation of all religious properties.

The insurgent leaders, Generals Fran-

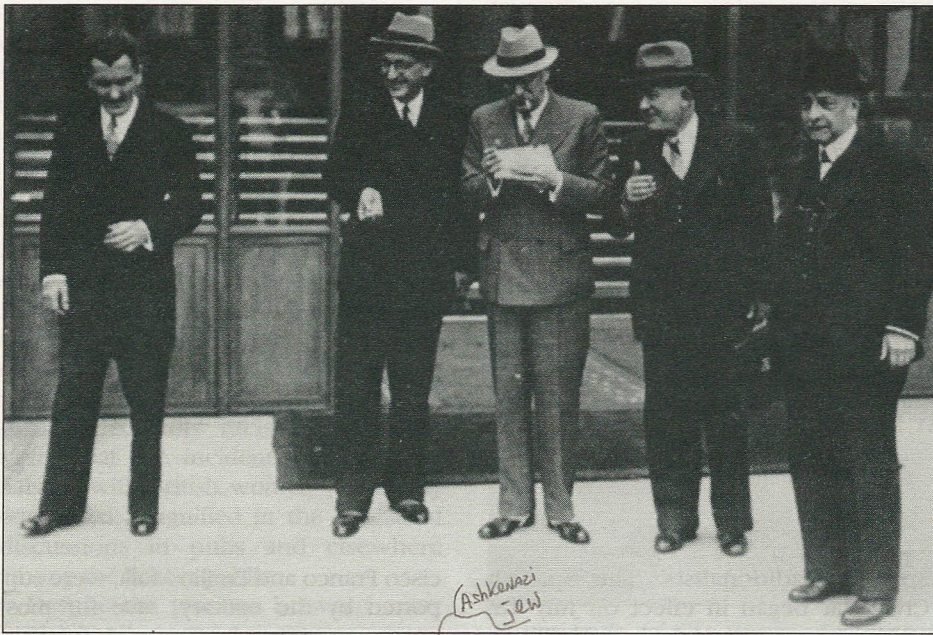
cisco Franco and Emilio Mola, were supported by the military, save for most non-commissioned officers. A formidable Moorish force in Spanish Morocco (The Army Of Africa) numbered about 32,000; half of them required for domestic duty. Toward war's end some 300,000 Moroccan troops would be fighting alongside the Nationalists. Spain's civil population was deeply divided.

Thus began a crucially important civil war of no-quarter brutality and agony that would last until Franco's triumph with the fall of Madrid on March 28,



*German Junkers 52 transports in Spanish Morocco stand by near the end of July, 1936 to ferry Moroccan regulares to Seville at the war's outset. The Moroccans were fierce and often brutal opponents. They were led by Spanish officers deeply dedicated to the eradication of Communists and their fellow travelers. General Franco had asked Germany for transport planes on July 22, 1936. Hitler gave his approval while visiting Bayreuth on July 25.*





*France's socialist premier Leon Blum (light suit, center) personally favored the Spanish Republicans. But strong French Catholic opinion forced his Popular Front government to remain officially neutral; while Blum turned a blind eye to French shipments to the Republicans. To Blum's right is Jules Moch, a close associate and member of his administration. In Germany, Hitler was convinced that the Communists would wrap up France if the increasingly Communist-controlled Spanish government prevailed.*

1939. Both sides received massive outside assistance so that they might keep up the fight. The Nationalist right was supported mainly by Germany, Italy and (to a much lesser extent) neighboring Portugal, which was ruled by its long-time folk dictator, Antonio Salazar. The Republicans were supported mainly by the Soviets and the leftist governments of France and (again to a much lesser extent) Mexico. The forces of international finance and fund-raising weighed heavily on the Republican side.

Prior to the war, a major factor was the May 2, 1935 signing of the Soviet-French Treaty of Mutual Assistance. In it both powers promised immediate mutual consultation if either were threatened. In June, 1936, a Popular Front government under Leon Blum took the reins in Paris; thereby assuring "Republican" Spain a warm liaison across the Pyrenees.

On August 5, 1936 Germany's Chancellor Adolf Hitler met with and expressed his concerns to a prominent Briton, Sir John Vansittart (who during WW II would become a BBC propagandist). The Englishman later recalled: "He thought the left in Spain would eventually win . . . If his prediction were verified, France would be infected dangerously, perhaps desperately, and the con-

tagion would then spread to their associates like Czechoslovakia where the seed was already sown. Germany would then be caught between two, if not three, fires and must be prepared."

Hitler's ambassador to Britain (and subsequent foreign minister) Joachim von Ribbentrop wrote that on July 26, 1936 Hitler told him: "Germany could not tolerate a Communist Spain under any circumstances . . . If a Communist [state] actually does emerge, in view of the current situation in France the Bolshevism of that country is also only a matter of a short time and Germany [with the Soviet Union in the East and a strong Communist bloc in the West] can *einpacken* —pack up."

In his famed *The Spanish Civil War* Hugh Thomas wrote that Soviet war materiel was first used in Spain in October, 1936. In 1956 the Soviet government stated that the long-gone Spanish Republican government owed it \$50 million; on top of monetary gold reserves equal to 63 million British pounds sent them in 1936. In October 1938 General Franco estimated (from captured weapons and other sources) that the Spanish Communists had obtained the following across the French border: 198 cannon, 200 tanks, 3,247 machine guns, 4,000 trucks, some 9,500 other vehicles, 47 artillery units,

4,565 tons of munitions and 14,889 tons of fuel.

This land-delivered materiel came mostly from Russia, Czechoslovakia and the United States, although President Roosevelt had declared an embargo on arms to Spain. The French government also supplied some 200 aircraft to Republican Spain. Figures on Soviet sea deliveries are somewhat vague. In 1936 and 1937 most Republican air force planes were flown by Soviet pilots; subsequently by Spaniards. Much of the aid to both sides arrived irregularly. For instance, German military figures show that in January, 1938 the Republicans received 15,400 tons of gasoline from the Soviets, 7,200 tons of crude oil from the United Kingdom and 4,650 tons of lubricants from Greece.

Robert H. Whealey wrote in *Hitler and Spain* that "as of September 12-14 [1936] it became official Soviet policy to send military aid to the Republican government in Spain. Shortly thereafter, on September 25—in violation of the spirit of the Non-Aggression Agreement—the first of five Russian ships, the *Neva*, arrived in Republican Spain with food, secret arms and munitions. According to Italian intelligence reporting from Alicante, the *Neva* unloaded 3,000 cases of rifles, 4,000 cases of ammunition and various boxes of aviation equipment on September 29."

Whealey wrote that "One good way of measuring foreign intervention over the course of the Spanish Civil War is to compare the money spent or loaned on both sides for military aid . . . the Soviets utilized some \$518 million in Spanish gold (via the Bank of Spain) to pay what Russia charged the Republic for the services of the International Brigades, plus a \$65 million Soviet loan. Axis credit included 540 million German reichsmarks (\$215 million in 1930s dollars) plus 6.8 billion Italian lire (\$354 million)—totaling \$569 million." A large part of the Spanish gold was re-exported to the Banque Commerciale pour l'Europe du Nord in Paris for the Madrid government to draw on. Whealey says the figures don't include private contributions from leftists and Communists in the West or Nationalist payments to its Moroccan troops.

In terms of attracting both contributions and volunteers to fight, the Communist side enjoyed a decided edge relative to both media bias in many coun-



tries and glamorous celebrity-activist fund-raisers. These included famed writer and Republican ambulance driver Ernest Hemingway, artist Pablo Picasso, black Communist baritone Paul Robeson and French literary lion Andre Malraux, who formed his own, but ineffective, air squadron. Fund-raising in such moneyed circles as Hollywood was stimulated not only by many Jewish film figures but leftist stars such as Fredric March, Myrna Loy and James Cagney; the latter turning sharply to the right in later years.

President Roosevelt, although continually badgered by his wife Eleanor to lift the arms embargo on Republican Spain, never moved in that direction. In the 1930s American Catholic voters were largely Democratic on election day, and the great majority of parishioners sided with the strongly anti-Communist clergy; particularly as atrocities committed against priests and nuns and the looting and burning of churches became known. However, according to Peter Wyden's *The Passionate War*, the president wondered at a cabinet meeting (after the fall of Madrid to the Nationalists) whether the government

should simply have prohibited transport in American flag ships.

On the Nationalist side, their limited air force was enormously and crucially backstopped by the presence of Germany's Condor Legion and the Italian Expeditionary Air Force. The Condor Legion, according to Hugh Thomas, reached a maximum of 10,000 personnel in the autumn of 1936 and averaged about 3,000 throughout the war. As is well known, air action in Spain proved a vital testing ground for the fledgling Luftwaffe.

The total number of Germans who participated in Spain came to 16,000; many of them civilian experts and instructors. The Condor Legion lost about 300 men in air combat. Some 14,000 veterans marched in the Condor Legion's victory parade in Berlin following the Nationalist victory. Germany also sent 30 anti-tank companies. Colonel von Thoma, who commanded the German tank corps, told the Americans in 1945 that he had experienced 192 tank engagements in Spain.

The Italian contingent, true volunteers and "volunteers" dispatched by Benito Mussolini, numbered about 55,000 (of whom 6,000 were killed). In 1941

Italy's usually reliable Stefani News Agency reported that Italy had sent 763 aircraft to Spain plus large numbers of aircraft motors, bombs, ammunition, guns, rifles and side arms, plus 7,663 vehicles. Its air force (where the best and most courageous were largely gathered) flew 135,265 pilot hours, participated in 5,318 air raids, hit 224 ships and brought down 903 planes. All told Italy's air force provided the Nationalists with 5,699 officers and men plus 312 civilian personnel.

Mussolini placed his Black Shirt legions under General Mario Roatta, who had been chief of Italian intelligence. Many fought well but great numbers broke in panic on occasion. Roatta reported that "the best Red troops" were international volunteers, because they fought with fierce hatred. His Italians, Roatta concluded, lacked motivation.

Over the years a great deal has been made of Republican-side volunteers. Among them were Communists, classless society theorists, and a mix of leftist sympathizers with a yen for adventure in the midst of a gray depression. Some 40,000 foreign volunteers fought with the Communist-controlled Republicans. There were approximately 3,000 Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades. Some 3,200 American citizens enlisted in the International Brigades, mostly in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. The first 76 of these sailed from New York on the French liner *Normandie* and arrived at le Havre, with some irony, on Christmas Eve, 1936.

About 1,500 of them made it back to the U.S. Cecil Eby's *Between The Bullet and the Lie* states that these leftist volunteers were victims of their own military leadership as well as Nationalist firepower. Eby wrote: "The large number of Jewish intellectuals aboard the *Normandie* were abysmally green. All had done their stint on picket lines and were up on party theory, but few had ever fired a rifle."

Hugh Thomas's research concluded that the largest contingent in the International Brigades were the 10,000 French, of whom 3,000 were killed. About 5,000 German and Austrian Communists and leftists went to Spain, of whom 2,000 were killed. There were also about 1,000 Canadians, 1,200 Yugoslavs, and about a thousand each of Hungarians and Scandinavians.

Among Americans, the right did not



In July, 1936 many of the churches in Barcelona were sacked and burned by those on the Republican side. This photo shows the remains of disinterred nuns placed on exhibition at the front of a convent. Such scenes typified levels of brutality that would not be approximated in 20th century European warfare save in Yugoslavia and when the Red Army reached German soil.





*The Irish Brigade was poorly equipped and led by the often drunk "General" Eoin O'Duffy. To say the least, its 600 men were misused. These wounded arrived in Dublin in June, 1937. The Foreign Legion was among the best equipped of Nationalist forces, yet until the 1938 Aragon offensive it was issued old machine guns whose firing pins broke continually.*

have "rally to the Nationalist banner" centers remotely comparable to the National Maritime Union and some other union halls, certain campus centers as well as Communist and some Jewish organizations. The Catholic clergy and its school systems were strongly opposed to Republican Spain, but stopped short of encouraging young Americans to take up arms. No members of the German American Bund are known to have gone to Spain. Some sources claim one American pilot flew for the Nationalists, and was killed early in the war.

As is often observed, the winners write the histories. The fascist side won Spain's war, but before the end of that summer World War II had begun; its winners setting the historical tone and ground rules. Thus the saga of the Nationalist volunteers was swept silently into the dustbins.

The Spanish Nationalists and their foreign volunteers were depicted by post-war historians and propagandists (which of course includes documentary producers) as simple puppets of the Axis powers. When not ignored they have been vilified. Many were primarily anti-Com-

munists, placing themselves on the line against an international plague that Mussolini termed "the disease of the 20th century." But others, rather than being "unwitting tools" of fascism, saw that ideology as the positive answer to their respective nation's future. Many had witnessed either the triumph or the threat of communism in their own countries

These foreign volunteers who fought on the Nationalist side would become the war's forgotten fighters. The largest group was Portuguese, calling themselves the *Legion de Viriatos* in remembrance of a guerrilla leader who had fought the Roman invaders. Hugh Thomas states that these numbered some 20,000, of whom 8,000 were killed. At least 4,000 Portuguese fought in the ranks of the Spanish Foreign Legion (*Banderas de Falange*) and the royalist units (*Tercios requetes*) in which foreigners could enlist. It has been calculated that between 600 and 700 of these died fighting in their adjoining country. They

were mostly nationalists, but included many members of the Portuguese fascist party.

Frenchmen provided the second largest Nationalist contingent. Some 1,000 volunteers enlisted in the Spanish Foreign Legion. The others formed an independent unit, *Compania Juana de Arco*, named for the French heroine of the Middle Ages. Former Czarist military officers received commissions on the Nationalist side. A White Russian contingent of company strength (some 200) sought vengeance against the Soviet-backed Republicans. There were also a number of individuals from various Eastern European countries who had come to know and despise communism.

Hundreds of the French volunteers fell in action, were badly wounded or were captured. Many of the surviving French volunteers would fight communism again in World War II on the eastern front; members of the French Volunteer Legion against Bolshevism.

Six hundred men of the Irish Free State fought the Reds in Spain under Ireland's fascistic Blue Shirt leader Eoin

O'Duffy. Most of these Irishmen were part of O'Duffy's organization but a number were adventurers who wanted to fight on the Catholic side. Evidently no more than a dozen British subjects fought for Franco. Of these, most were at least half Irish. They included former British Army officers and men of academic accomplishment.

The Romanian Fascist party, the Iron Guard, dispatched a select unit of volunteers. They fought for a year, until conditions at home required their recall.

One American woman volunteer in Red-held Madrid showed incredible selfless courage and, had she been a figure of the left, would no doubt have become a celebrated heroine courtesy of the Western media. Her name was Helen Walker, the daughter of an ITT engineer in Spain who had married Antonio Garrigues y Diaz Canabate, a Spanish Nationalist nobleman-lawyer. Peter Wyden wrote that the couple had joined a Nationalist resistance cell. They sheltered seven nuns in their basement and arranged for food and hiding places for Nationalist fugitives. Just before Madrid fell to the Nationalists, the couple used their clandestine influence to prevent last minute firing squad executions of imprisoned rightists.

With the surrender of the Communist-dominated leftist coalition, a number of its troops fled north across the Pyrenees to France. They operated against the Germans during WWII with the leftist or Communist elements of the *Maquis* terrorist underground.

Many foreign volunteers who had fought for the Nationalists would subsequently fight the Soviets in the snows of Finland, on the Russian front and even in the streets of Berlin in 1945. The largest number would don the gray uniform of the *Waffen* (foreign) SS in the titanic struggle to come. In all, some 600,000 Spaniards and foreigners were killed. A sixth of these fell as a result of summary executions, to give slaughter a somewhat pristine reference.

With World War II approaching, the

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guns of Spain were silenced. Hitler was severely dismayed that Franco did not join the Axis cause. Franco felt that his country was psychologically and physically incapable of what would be required. Had he joined Germany and Italy, given the situation that would have caused relative to Britain's Mediterranean lifeline, Churchill might indeed have been forced to accept peace in the West following Dunkirk; his FDR administration's alliance notwithstanding. In this course Franco and his Falange party associates were helped immeasurably by Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, Germany's double dealing intelligence chief.

In any event, the little remembered sacrifices of the Spanish right, its foreign volunteers and Moroccan troops as well as the crucial assistance of Germany and Italy, kept the Iberian peninsula and probably much more of Europe beyond the Soviet bear's claws. ♦

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*A contingent of Italian "volunteers" is welcomed back from Spain as they disembark at Naples. At the time of the major Nationalist offensive against Catalonia in December, 1938 the Italian Legionary Corps numbered 55,000. Although both sides held their fighting qualities and lust for battle in low regard, the Italians performed creditably at Catalonia. By this late stage of the war, as stated by Antony Beevor in his *The Spanish Civil War*, FDR admitted that the embargo of arms to the Republicans "had been a grave mistake" while "Churchill and Eden . . . now realized what [Republican] extinction signified."*

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1. During World War I he reputedly told a general: "When the Russians lose, my father cries. When the Germans lose, my mother cries. When am I to cry?"
2. Location of British PM John Major's parliamentary seat.
3. George I, son of Christian IX of Denmark, ruled this Mediterranean country from 1863 to 1913.
4. In 1948, accepting his party's presidential nomination at Philadelphia's Shibe Park, he called for U.S. withdrawal from Berlin as a solution to the Soviet blockade of that city.
5. This president added a "corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine relative to problems with Venezuela and then-Santo Domingo.

*Theodore Roosevelt.  
1. Tsarevich Alexis of Russia. 2. Huntingdon, 60 miles directly north of London. 3. Greece. 4. Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace. 5.*