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The Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War was waged between the Republicans and the Nationalists from July 1936 to April 1939. Here is a military and strategic overview of that conflict.

The Outbreak

In July 1936 a group of dissatisfied right-wing generals proclaimed themselves the new authority in Spain. The large landowners of Spain, the hierarchy of the Catholic church, and some, though not all, of Spain's financiers and industrialists, gave instinctive support to the military uprising. Like the generals, they felt threatened by the elected government's plans for reform. The fascist Falange movement and the ultra-religious Carlist monarchists also joined in with the military rebels. The rebel generals controlled the Army of Africa. This contained the most effective units of the Spanish army. The rebel officers and their sympathisers had been plotting for months and knew they could count on support from Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and the dictator Salazar of Portugal.

The rebels did not control the whole of the Spanish armed forces, however. Many in the army, navy, air force and various police formations (*Guardia Civil*, *Guardias de Seguridad y Asalto*, *Cuerpo de Carabineros*) remained loyal. Left-wing political parties and trade unions did not think that the government reforms went far enough towards tackling Spain's pressing social problems, such as widespread poverty and low levels of literacy. Marxist and anarchist groups had their own plans for a revolutionary takeover of power. Nevertheless, when the government - reluctantly - agreed to issue them with weapons, militias organised by the left fought alongside loyal troops and police. Basques and Catalans knew that the Spanish 'Nationalists', as the rebels styled themselves, would not tolerate their own desire to be recognised as independent nations. In exchange for such recognition they agreed to co-operate with the elected government.

The legally-elected government was therefore able to mobilise resistance in many areas of the country, most significantly in the capital, Madrid.

The Early Fighting - July 1936

In the early days of the rebellion the level of support for the rebels varied from region to region of Spain. Where one side or the other had the clear support of the local military and police units, control was quickly decided, with little bloodshed in combat. Elsewhere, local control was decided only after days of confused fighting. The opposing forces were, typically, improvised combat groups. Rebel troops and police joined with blue-shirted Falangists and red-bonneted Carlists. Loyal troops and police teamed up with left-wing militiamen and militiawomen.

Fighting centred on the control of military barracks and government buildings. Artillery pieces often settled the outcome. Which side controlled these would depend on the mood of a particular barracks. Aircraft and armoured vehicles were rarely seen. For years, the Spanish armed forces had been essentially a colonial and domestic police force. There had been little need for such expensive items of modern weaponry.

The Assassination of Lorca

One early casualty of the war was the great poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca, whose notable works include *Blood Wedding* and *The House of Bernarda Alba*.

Born in 1898, the outbreak of war made him leave Madrid in July 1936 for Granada. But tragic and violent death, which he had so often written about in his plays and poems, was to prove his end too. He was shot and killed by the Nationalists during the night of 19 - 20 August.

Clash of Columns - August to September 1936

By August 1936, the country was divided into distinct zones, some controlled by forces loyal to the government, some not. The rebels were defeated in Madrid and in Barcelona. The Basque country and neighbouring territories of the northern coast also resisted the rising. Much of northern Spain, however, declared for the Nationalists, who also controlled the southernmost part of the country, around Seville.

Units of the Army of Africa, comprising Spanish Foreign Legion and Moroccan troops, arrived in southern Spain throughout the summer months. Aeroplanes supplied by Nazi Germany helped to speed the passage of this capable fighting force from Morocco to the mainland. From the start of the rebellion, and continuing into August, mobile columns in commandeered transport roamed the countryside, as both sides tried to expand or consolidate the areas that they controlled, or simply went looking for enemy forces to fight. The Nationalist campaign proved to be more adventurous and better organised. Small groups of loyalist fighters defending individual villages were swept aside as the rebels secured the Portuguese border and pushed towards Madrid.

A fierce battle occurred at the border town of Badajoz. The subsequent massacre of prisoners by the Nationalists typified the kind of excesses which both sides were guilty of during the war. A few foreign volunteers - some who came to fight for revolutionary ideals, others simply against fascism - arrived in what was now being called 'Republican' Spain. Italian aircraft appeared on the Nationalist side. Italian aircraft and naval forces ensured that the ferrying of troops from Spanish Morocco to the mainland could continue unimpeded, and were largely responsible for the defeat of a Republican attempt to recapture the island of Majorca.

Escalation - October 1936 to June 1937

On 1 October, 1936, the various groups that made up the Nationalist coalition decided upon General Franco as their Head of State and Commander-in-Chief. The Republican government was a coalition of the various parties that opposed the rebellion. From July 1936 to April 1939 the Republic had two Presidents (Azaña, Martínez Barrio) and five Prime Ministers (Quiroga, Martínez Barrio, Giral, Largo Caballero, Negrín). None of them was to prove capable of bringing about a unity of effort on the Republican side to compare with that achieved by the Nationalists.

By October 1936 the Nationalists controlled much of northern and western Spain. A Republican coastal enclave still remained in the north, including important industrial sites. But this was separated by miles of hostile territory from the rest of Republican Spain. The Nationalists were unchallenged in the extreme south. Still under Republican control was a

large and consolidated area comprising Catalonia, most of the Mediterranean coast, and a swathe of territory from Madrid to the coast.

The Nationalists pressed close to Madrid, entering the suburbs in November 1936. They became firmly established in a part of the city by December, but were then unable to penetrate further. The following months saw a series of battles as they attempted to encircle the capital. After the battles of the Corunna Road, Jarama, and Guadalajara, many on both sides were dead but, positionally, nothing much had changed. Madrid was not encircled but was still besieged.

Both sides set out to create conventional mass armies. The Carlist and Falangist militias were made subject to the regular Nationalist military command structure, and the Nationalists took over the system of conscription in the areas they controlled.

The Republicans re-applied the official system of conscription, which had been disrupted by the rebellion, and re-organized their forces. The *Ejército Popular* (Popular Army) was created, combining political militias, existing regular units and new conscripts in 'mixed brigades'. The term referred to the mixture of infantry with other branches of service. It was also intended, however, that the new formations should contain a mixture of political elements, in the hope that this would encourage a sense of common purpose and unity. Both sides received help from abroad. The Republic had few friends there, though the Czechs seemed sympathetic and Mexico sent some rifles. Only the Soviet Union was willing and able to give effective support. Russian armaments, particularly tanks and aircraft, helped to save Madrid.

Whatever the attitude of governments, individual citizens and sympathetic political parties in many countries took steps to act. Thousands of volunteers arrived in Republican Spain and began to be organised as the International Brigades. Germans, Italians and East Europeans, driven from their own countries by dictatorship - French, British, North Americans, South Americans - black, white, Indians, Chinese - volunteers from all corners of the globe came together in the cause of anti-Fascism.

The fascist Falange party was in fact a minority element of the Nationalist coalition. But the Nationalists showed fascist contempt for representative democracy. They were allied to the fascist nations. That others should label the whole Nationalist movement as fascist was unsurprising.

Complete divisions of Italian troops were now fighting on the Nationalist side. The Italians took the southern city of Málaga, then, thrown at Mussolini's insistence into the battle for Madrid, these well equipped but poorly led troops were heavily defeated at Guadalajara in March 1937 by Republican forces that included the Garibaldi Battalion of anti-fascist Italians. The Italian embarrassment at Guadalajara strengthened Franco's ability to impose his own views as to the conduct of the war.

Hitler contributed the Condor Legion, consisting of German aircraft, tanks, artillery and communications equipment, along with the relevant operating crews. German and Italian ships lurked around the Spanish coastline, taking action against Republican shipping. Most of the Spanish navy - ships and men - was under Republican control. There were too few capable officers, however, most having either joined the Nationalists or having been shot by their crew for trying to. The Republican fleet for the most part stayed cooped up in the Mediterranean port of Cartagena.

The French government decided on a policy of non-intervention, and closed the border. There was nothing to prevent a complete Nationalist blockade of the Republican north.

Unsupplied, the Basques and neighbouring loyalists were forced into slow but continual retreat. The fall of Bilbao in June 1937 signalled the end for the Republican forces in the north, and brought the resources of this major industrial area under Nationalist control.

Guernica

Guernica Y Luno is a city just north-east of Bilbao, near the inlet of the Bay of Biscay in the Basque Country of northern Spain. In 1932 Guernica had been in the forefront of the agitation for an independent Basque state. Hitler now saw Spain as a testing-ground for Germany's newest weapons and tactics, and in April 1937 Guernica was heavily bombed, supposedly by German planes.

The bombing of Guernica caused far fewer deaths than legend would have us believe, but the incident became an icon of anti-Fascism through Pablo Picasso's famous painting, *Guernica*.

Mass Armies - July 1937 to March 1939

By July 1937 the *Ejército Popular* was nearly half a million strong. The Nationalist army was of a similar size. To relieve the crumbling northern front and to try to break the siege of Madrid the Republicans launched a major attack at Brunete. The offensive gained some territory and did divert Nationalist forces from the north, then fell apart when the Nationalist reinforcements arrived.

The Nationalists resumed their advance. Another relieving attack by the main Republican forces was made at Belchite, south of Zaragoza, in August 1937. This could not prevent the collapse of the northern Basque and Republican armies. Gijón, the last centre of resistance in the north, fell to Franco's troops in October 1937. The fall of the north released Nationalist troops, guns, tanks and aircraft for use on other fronts, and naval forces to strengthen the blockade of the Mediterranean coast.

The Republicans, anticipating a renewed Nationalist effort to take Madrid, mounted a diversionary attack at Teruel, halfway between Madrid and Barcelona, in December 1937. Success there would also strengthen communications with Catalonia. The Republicans took the town in early January 1938, only to be driven back many miles as the Nationalists concentrated their forces and counter-attacked.

Madrid had been spared, but for the Nationalists the opportunity had arisen to cut Republican territory in two. They pushed towards Barcelona and the Mediterranean, reaching the coast in April 1938. The Republicans in Aragón and Catalonia fell back towards Barcelona. The impetus of the Nationalist attack was, however, lost by the subtraction of forces for an expedition southwards towards Valencia, in July 1938. Well planned defensive lines had been prepared there by the Republicans. These helped to counter the Nationalist superiority in aircraft and artillery. The Nationalists suffered heavy casualties and could not break through.

The political situation in France changed. This allowed the Republican forces defending Barcelona to be re-supplied across the land frontier. Britain and France seemed to be about to confront Germany over the issue of Czechoslovakia. The Republicans were determined to fight on in the hope that the newly sympathetic attitude of the British and French governments might evolve into unequivocal support for their cause.

In late July 1938, a Republican army of 120,000 men attacked across the Ebro river. One aim was to capture land and reconnect the Republican territories. Another aim was to draw Nationalist forces away from Madrid and Valencia. The main intention, perhaps, was simply to demonstrate to the democratic powers the continued military viability of the Republic.

Taken by surprise, the Nationalists were forced back some 25 miles at the point of attack. But they had sufficient resources to contain Madrid and reinforce the Mediterranean front. By August 1938 the Republican Army of the Ebro could advance no further, and began a protracted struggle to defend the captured salient south of the river. The Nationalists had more aircraft, artillery and ammunition than their opponents, and they concentrated these to provide overwhelming firepower, in a series of local attacks. November 1938 saw the Republicans forced back to the north bank of the Ebro.

The political situation changed again. Appeasement of Nazi Germany was once more the dominant concern of Britain and France. The French frontier was closed. The Republican forces in Catalonia, demoralised and unsupplied, simply collapsed.

Barcelona fell to the Nationalists in January 1939. In Madrid some Republicans were determined to fight on. Others, led by Colonel Casado, were intent on negotiating an end to the war. The Casado faction prevailed, and was compelled by Franco to accept the only terms available: unconditional surrender. In March 1939, Nationalist forces occupied Madrid and the war was over.

Republican Versus Republican

In addition to the main conflict outlined above, there were instances during the war of combat between different factions on the Republican side.

Communists and Anarchists exchanged fire in Madrid in December 1936. Independent Marxists (POUM) and Anarchists (FAI) joined together in Barcelona in May 1937 to shoot it out with forces loyal to the Catalan government. Units led by Colonel Casado, seeking to negotiate peace with the Nationalists, clashed with others determined to fight on against Franco, in Madrid in March 1939.

Nationalist Versus Nationalist

There was also one instance of fighting between rival groups on the Nationalist side, when two opposing factions of the Falange party exchanged shots in Salamanca in April 1937.

Casualties

Deaths in battle amounted to 145,000 over the whole of the war. Rather more than half of these were Republicans. Thousands of non-combatants lost their lives in political executions carried out during the war, mostly by the Nationalists. Taking all causes of death into account, the Spanish Civil War claimed, at the very least, 250,000 lives.