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*SOVIET INTERVENTION  
IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR,  
1936-39: A REEXAMINATION*

Amid the jumbled fusion of emotionally-charged ideological struggles and cynical geopolitical maneuvering that made up the Spanish Civil War, Soviet assistance to the Loyalist Republic of Spain stands out as one of the most controversial issues. It has also remained one of the most poorly understood. The problem is not a lack of information; there is no shortage of material on the subject. Unfortunately, the bulk of that material, whether scholarly literature or the memoirs of contemporary observers and participants, suffers from bias, inaccuracy, or both.

A reasonably complete narrative and analysis can be collated from the existing literature, and new materials have recently become available in Russian archives. Yet no single work has ever treated Soviet intervention in Spain in an objective and comprehensive manner. Scholars of the Soviet period have largely ignored the topic or relied on accounts by journalists or general historians. Conversely, those historians and journalists have wholly neglected Soviet sources due to ideological antagonism or inability to obtain or utilize those sources.

As a result, the vast literature dealing with the Spanish Civil War has yet to address adequately fundamental facts of the USSR's role in the Republic's war effort.<sup>1</sup> No work has at once traced the part the Spanish war played in Soviet foreign policy; shown how the war preceded the Munich Agreement of September 1938 as a factor in breaking the back of collective security; demonstrated the many conflicts within the Soviet contingent in Spain; and, finally, corrected the factual errors and misconceptions which persist even in recent scholarship. This article is an attempt to integrate works commonly used in the West with Soviet sources in order to present a richer and more ac-

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1. Perhaps the most successful attempt can be found in Burnett Bolloten's mammoth study, *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1991). Bolloten spent over fifty years researching the Spanish Civil War, and his mastery of the topic is readily evident in this authoritative, yet readable, work. Bolloten also amassed a tremendous private collection (which is now housed in the Hoover Institute at Stanford University) of documents, clippings, and interview transcripts concerning the Spanish Civil War.

curate picture of a topic which has drawn great attention and speculation, yet remains largely in shadow.

### FROM CIVIL WAR TO INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

A number of social and political factors lay behind the revolt against the Spanish Republic on July 17, 1936, but the catalyst can be found in the elections of February 16, 1936, which ended the *Bienio Negro* ("Black Bienium") of right-wing domination of Spain and ushered in Europe's first Popular Front government.<sup>2</sup> Both the leftist coalition and right-center bloc opposing it had indulged in electoral fraud, and the left emerged with only a narrow margin of victory.<sup>3</sup> The right, an amalgamation of military officers, monarchists, Carlists (right-wing Catholic monarchists), members of the political wing of the Catholic clergy (*Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas*: CEDA), and Fascist Falangists, protested the results briefly, then began to plot the overthrow of President Manuel Azaña and his new government.

Although the government knew about the plotting, the actual uprising on July 17 and 18 caught the country in a state of semi-preparedness. After the first week had passed, however, the Insurgent position was less than ideal.<sup>4</sup> Although the rebels possessed the advantage of military expertise (the overwhelming majority of the officer corps and almost half of the regular troops joined the Insurgents) and controlled pockets in the northwest and southwest agricultural heartlands, they failed to capitalize upon the Republic's initial confusion. The rebel commander, General José Sanjurjo, died in a plane crash on July 20, while Francisco Franco, second in command, was marooned with his troops in Spanish Morocco as enthusiastic, if inexperienced, Anarchist sailors seized control of the navy in the name of the Republic. The strategic outlook also favored the Loyalists, who retained control of the four key industrial cen-

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2. For detailed backgrounds to the Spanish Civil War, see Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth* (New York: Macmillan, 1974) and Franz Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1971). The best-known general history of the war is Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961).

3. Gabriel Jackson, *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974), 32, reports the election results as follows: the right received 4 million votes, while the center attracted only 450,000 votes. The leftist coalition won with 4.7 million votes.

4. Until November 11, 1936, when Germany and Italy recognized the Burgos government established by Franco on October 1, the rebels were known as "Insurgents" or simply "rebels." After November, Franco adopted the term "Nationalist." I avoid referring to Franco's government and army as "Fascist," not only because of its pejorative tone (although I apply it to Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy), but also because the Fascists made up only part of Franco's coalition. Thus, calling the Nationalists "Fascists" is as unfair as calling the Republicans "Reds" or "Communists," although both were commonly done. As for the Republicans, I refer to them interchangeably as "Republicans" and "Loyalists."

ters of the country: Oviedo, Valencia, Barcelona, and Madrid. Most important, the Insurgents lacked mass support. The spontaneous and frenzied popular resistance to the rebellion shocked the rebels and the Republic alike. The popular militias could not hope to win in the field, but when it came to street-fighting in the cities, their numbers and enthusiasm greatly offset their lack of armament or training.

Had the war continued without outside interference, time would have sided with the Republic as attrition wore down rebel supplies and manpower. But Portuguese dictator Antonio Salazar offered his aid to the rebels, allowing them to establish a solid front in the west. Benito Mussolini responded eagerly to Franco's petition for assistance, and badgered a reluctant Adolf Hitler into supporting the Insurgents. By July 26, both Italy and Germany were supplying the rebels with arms, aircraft, and troops; German pilots airlifted Franco and his men from Africa to southwestern Spain, uniting the Insurgent generals in the west.<sup>5</sup> In September, the rebels began to drive east toward Madrid.

The Republic had less luck in its search for allies. The Mexican government sent a tiny shipment of arms as a token of fraternal support, but the Republic needed help from Europe. Leon Blum, the head of France's newly-elected Popular Front, initially promised aid, but conservative elements in France, as well as the British government, browbeat him into withdrawing his offer. The Baldwin cabinet, poorly disposed from the start toward the Republic, which it regarded as "Red," took the lead in forming the Non-Intervention Committee (NIC) to monitor the war and prevent its spread to the rest of Europe.

The NIC first assembled on September 9; its members included Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the USSR, Portugal, Belgium, Sweden, and Czechoslovakia. Neither the Republic nor the Nationalists received an invitation to participate. The NIC formally outlawed all aid to both the Republic and Franco's forces, but made no provision for enforcing the ban.

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5. Mussolini, fresh from his victory in Ethiopia, immediately welcomed the opportunity to aid Franco; Hitler proved less enthusiastic, but Hermann Goering shared Mussolini's optimism and persuaded Hitler to intervene (Jackson, *Concise History*, 49). The Italians sent tens of thousands of troops, but exact numbers are not available. M. P. Botin, *S toboi, Ispaniia* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1976), 58, states that the Italians also sent 1,000 airplanes, 950 tanks, and 2,000 artillery pieces. Jose García, "Internatsional'nye brigady v Ispanii, 1936-1939," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 7 (1956): 34, argues that they sent 800 aircraft, 700 tanks, and 2,000 artillery pieces. The German operation, coded *Unternehmen Feuerzauber* ("Operation Magic Fire"), consisted mainly of material aid, not troops. Botin claims the Germans provided 650 airplanes, 200 tanks, and 700 artillery pieces. The famous "Condor Legion," the German air squadron serving in Spain, numbered from 6,000 (Thomas, *Spanish Civil War*, 634) to 8,000 (García, "Internatsional'ny brigady," 34). Jackson (*Concise History*, 60) states that the Germans sent 10,000 additional troops, while Portugal sent 20,000.

Germany and Italy violated the agreement with complete impunity, but England and France were able to pressure the Soviet Union into maintaining at least the illusion of compliance. Britain and France did succeed in containing the war to Spanish territory, but only by sacrificing the Republic to the Fascists.<sup>6</sup> Whether that sacrifice was justified or not, the NIC tremendously hindered Soviet efforts to aid the Republic, and played a great role in Stalin's subsequent foreign policy decisions.

### STALINIST FOREIGN POLICY AND THE DECISION TO AID SPAIN

Our orientation in the past and our orientation at the present time is towards the USSR, and towards the USSR alone. And if the interests of the USSR demand rapprochement with one country or another which is not interested in disturbing peace, we take this step without hesitation. (Stalin)<sup>7</sup>

There is not the slightest doubt that a deep fear of Hitler's Germany was the essential guide to all Soviet foreign policy in the mid-1930s. It led Moscow to enter the League of Nations and conduct a painfully futile struggle for active collective security against the Axis. (Hilger)<sup>8</sup>

Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and renunciation of the Rapallo Treaty, which had provided for close Soviet-German collaboration since 1922, threatened the USSR with diplomatic isolation in an increasingly dangerous

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6. For a detailed Anglo-American perspective on the NIC, see Norman J. Padelford, *International Law and Diplomacy in the Spanish Civil Strife* (New York: Macmillan, 1939). Padelford concludes that the preservation of peace warranted the suspension of certain ideals and legal rights. For the Soviet point of view, see Jane Degras, ed., whose *Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy*, vol. 3 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953) contains the papers of Maxim Litvinov and S. B. Kagan, the Soviet representative to the NIC. Ivan Maisky, in his *Spanish Notebooks* (London: Hutchinson, 1966), eloquently protests the actions of the NIC, as does the Republic's foreign minister, Julio Alvarez del Vayo, in *Freedom's Battle* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1940) and *The Last Optimist* (New York: Viking, 1950). Alvarez del Vayo sums up the Republican position in his remark that the NIC's work "was the finest example of the art of handing victims over to aggressor states, while preserving the perfect manners of a gentleman and at the same time giving the impression that peace is the one objective and consideration" (*Freedom's Battle*, 252).

7. Speech by Stalin at the Seventeenth Party Congress, January 1934. Cited in David T. Cattell, *Soviet Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1957), v.

8. Gustav Hilger, *The Incompatible Allies* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 276. Hilger had a long career in Germany's foreign ministry as an expert on the USSR. He served as Ribbentrop's translator during the negotiation of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939.

Europe. Josef Stalin quickly called for policy reversals in both the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs and the Communist International. Maxim Litvinov began preaching the doctrine of collective security to Europe, while the Comintern abandoned its disastrous "social-fascist" formula and embraced Europe's Popular Front coalitions of socialist, liberal, and moderate parties. The Soviet Union's most important foreign policy goal involved convincing the West that Russia and the Comintern were committed to peaceful and non-revolutionary means of combatting fascism. The USSR concluded treaties of alliance with Czechoslovakia and France in 1935, and both Moscow and the Comintern minimized their revolutionary rhetoric and activity.

From Stalin's perspective, the war in Spain provided the Soviet Union with the opportunity to prove its good intentions against the Fascist powers. Furthermore, given the large socialist presence in the Loyalist coalition, the USSR was naturally inclined to ally with the Republic. Soviet citizens held mass rallies in support of the Republic, and Soviet aid agencies collected 274 million rubles' worth of food, clothing and medication for the Republic during the course of the war.<sup>9</sup>

George Kennan believes that the USSR began its operations in Spain in "good faith," and evidence bears this conjecture out.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, the Western powers, especially Britain, remained skeptical of Stalin's sincerity. The fiery rhetoric of Spanish Anarchists and Socialists, calling for social revolution, did little to help. England and France, suspicious of Stalin's motives and reluctant to be drawn into full-scale war, made it clear through the NIC that any effort by the USSR on behalf of the Spanish Republic would be interpreted as a violation of international law.

And so England and France sharply rebuffed the Soviet Union in its one concrete attempt to implement its policy of collective security. Having been rebuffed, why did Stalin decide to aid Spain despite such opposition? As his speech to the Seventeenth Party Congress shows, Stalin's foreign policy tended to be more situational than consistent. The USSR had already become lodged in what John Erickson termed "the cleft stick": Nazi Germany had declared its antipathy for the Soviet regime, but the USSR's logical partners against Hitler had little liking for Stalin either, and the possibility that the western powers would try to push the USSR into a war with Germany was not altogether unlikely.<sup>11</sup>

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9. Jackson, *Concise History*, 60; Botin, *S toboi, Ispaniia*, 13; and M. T. Meshcheriakov, *Ispanskaia respublika i Komintern* (Moscow: Mysl', 1981), 48-54. In addition, hundreds of Spanish orphans came to live in the USSR during and after the war.

10. George Kennan, *Russia and the West* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), 308-12, 317-18.

11. John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962), 428.

Given this situation, Stalin had little to lose by covertly supporting the Republic, so long as he avoided provoking an all-out war with Hitler. Meanwhile, Soviet troops would gain experience and test newly-developed weapons under combat conditions. If the operation succeeded, the USSR would gain a new ally in Spain, and perhaps the respect and trust of France and Britain. At the least, Stalin would demonstrate to Germany that the Soviet Union was an enemy to be feared—or an ally to be coveted. In mid- to late August, Stalin evaluated the prospects for assistance; many of the personnel who would play key roles in the operation arrived in Spain at this time. By early to mid-September, Stalin had made his decision to intervene, and shipments of arms and personnel began to arrive in October.<sup>12</sup>

### THE INTERVENTION BEGINS

The responsibility for the operation fell primarily to the Foreign Department (*Inostrannyi otdel*: INO) of the NKVD (*Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennykh Del*: People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) and the GRU (*Glavnoe Razvedyvatel'noe Upravlenie*), the Soviet military intelligence agency. The NKVD took overall control of the operation, and its first priority involved the shipment of arms and supplies to Spain. The NKVD *rezident* in the Netherlands, Walter Krivitsky, purchased weapons in Europe through a network of dummy import-export firms. Krivitsky provides few details about the arms he obtained, but the overall significance of his efforts cannot have been great.<sup>13</sup> Direct Soviet shipments through the Baltic Sea and the Dardanelles proved far more reliable and provided material of higher quality.<sup>14</sup> Recent Soviet sources

12. Stanley Payne, *The Spanish Republic* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), 264–65, asserts that Soviet arms may have been shipped as early as July, but has no proof other than Nationalist propagandists, who tried to prove that Soviet scheming had necessitated the rebellion. For the timetable presented in this essay, see Thomas, *Spanish Civil War*, 262–63; Meshcheriakov, *Ispanskaia respublika*, 48–54; and Walter G. Krivitsky, *In Stalin's Secret Service* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1985), 82–84, who states that Stalin's intention to assist the Republic was made explicit at a September 14 meeting.

13. Krivitsky, *In Stalin's Secret Service*, 85. Krivitsky defected to the USA in September 1937; procuring weapons for the Spanish operation was one of his last assignments. The arms he obtained tended to be of inferior quality. Furthermore, Burton Whaley, *Guerrillas in the Spanish Civil War* (Detroit: Management Information Services, 1969), 66–68, suggests that German agents penetrated Krivitsky's network and provided his buyers with defective material. Since Krivitsky boasted of buying arms from the German military, he may well have been double-crossed.

14. D. C. Watt, "Soviet Military Aid to the Spanish Republic in the Civil War, 1936-1939," *Slavonic and East European Review* (1959–60): 536, reprints the observations of the German military *attache* in Turkey, who logged the contents of ninety-seven ships suspected to contain Soviet materials bound for Spain. No available source indicates how much material the USSR shipped to Spain through the Baltic.

state that, over a thirty-two month period, the USSR provided the Republic with the armament described in Table 1.<sup>15</sup>

**Table 1. Soviet Material Aid to the Spanish Republic**

806 aircraft	110,000 bombs
362 tanks	120 armored cars
1,555 artillery pieces	3.4 million artillery shells
500,000 rifles	862 million cartridges
340 grenade launchers	500,000 grenades
15,113 machine guns	1,500 tons gunpowder

With Soviet arms came Soviet personnel: military advisers, pilots, tank crews, interpreters, support staff, reporters, and intelligence officers. Non-Soviet sources deal poorly with the Soviet contingent in Spain; they tend to amplify the size of the Soviet presence and treat it as a monolithic entity.

The first mistake is understandable. Nationalist and Nazi propagandists had a vested interest in painting the Republic as "Red" as possible, and greatly exaggerated the number of Soviets fighting for the Loyalists. In addition, a large number of East Europeans and Slavs joined the International Brigades; since they used Russian as a *lingua franca*, onlookers of both sides often mistook them for Soviets.<sup>16</sup> Finally, a high turnover rate prevailed in the Soviet camp, so while the number of Soviets serving in Spain over the course of the war became reasonably large, the number actually in Spain at one time remained quite small. Approximately two thousand Soviets served in Spain, but no more than 700 or 800 were present at any given time. Table 2 categorizes the Soviet contingent by specialty.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 2. Soviet Personnel in Spain, 1936-39**

772 aviators	52 other military specialists
351 tank personnel	130 technicians/engineers
100 artillerists	156 radiomen
77 naval personnel	204 translators
222 advisers/instructors	

15. *Solidarnost' narodov s Ispanskoi respublikoi, 1936-1939* (Moscow: Nauka, 1972), 254-56.

16. Thomas Wintringham, *English Captain* (London: Faber & Faber, 1939), 152; and Tsvetlan Kristanov, *Za svobodu Ispanii* (Moscow: Progress, 1969), which describes the experience of the Bulgarian battalions in the International Brigades.

17. *Solidarnost'*, 254-56. Also see Louis Fischer, *Men and Politics* (New York: Duell, Sloan, & Pearce, 1941), 498. In addition to this total, A. I. Rodimtsev, *Pod nebom Ispanii* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1968), 115, mentions a small body of cavalry troops which served the Republic under the "Cossack officer" Andrei Savchenko. Finally, this table does not include civilians, political figures, or NKVD operatives in Spain.

The USSR sent no ground troops to Spain, although a number of experts in guerrilla warfare and terrorism ran operations and trained Spanish troops. Stalin expected his men to act with circumspection, as his famous instruction for them to "stay out of artillery range!" ("*Podal'she ot artillereiskogo ognia!*") indicates.<sup>18</sup> Complete secrecy, however, was impossible. Not only were the Russians conspicuous in Spain, but the Soviet media devoted considerable coverage to their exploits.<sup>19</sup> The Soviet Union's official position maintained that none of its citizens were in Spain on behalf of the USSR; they were all "volunteers."<sup>20</sup> Nobody believed the lie, but it served as a convenient fiction at NIC hearings.

The Soviet Union also played the instrumental part in recruiting the renowned International Brigades. The Communist International indisputably provided senior leadership for the Brigades. The list of well-known communists acting as commanders or commissars in the International Brigades included Ernő Gerő, Hans Kahle, Hans Beimler, Gustav Regler, Vittorio Vidali, the tyrannical André Marty, and Mate Zalka, better known as the beloved "General Lukacz." Vittorio Codovilla of Argentina and Stoian Minev of Bulgaria led the Brigades with the senior Comintern figure present in Spain, Palmiro Togliatti ("Ercoli"), who reported regularly and directly to Stalin.<sup>21</sup>

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18. Erickson, *Soviet High Command*, 428–30. See also Krivitsky, *In Stalin's Secret Service*, 77.

19. Soviet "volunteers" (*dobrovol'tsy*) appeared with increasing frequency in leading newspapers such as *Pravda*, *Izvestiia*, *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, and *Krasnaia zvezda*, especially after the Republic repulsed the Nationalist assault on Madrid with the help of Soviet troops. The Soviet media was well represented in Spain. Boris Makaseev, the prominent filmmaker, spent time there. Author Il'ia Ehrenburg served as *Izvestiia's* special correspondent, and the charismatic and talented Mikhail Kol'tsov represented *Pravda*. Kol'tsov's duties in Spain likely involved intelligence work as well. Before returning to the USSR, where he was purged, Kol'tsov became good friends with Ernest Hemingway, who depicted him as "Karkov" in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940).

20. Soviet personnel in Spain were certainly not volunteers in the sense that they fought there on an independent basis. After the war, the USSR admitted to its operations in Spain, but stated that every Soviet citizen who participated in them had been recruited on a volunteer basis; in other words, none of them had been assigned against their will to serve in Spain. This was likely true, but cannot be proven one way or another.

21. See R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army* (Lexington, KY: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1982). Also, E. H. Carr, *The Comintern and the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 89–101, reproduces some of Togliatti's correspondence with Stalin. In addition, the nominal commander of the Brigades, General Emil Kleber, was an NKVD agent. Born Manfred Stern in Austria, "Kleber" had worked for the USSR all over the world, from China to Canada. In the public eye, his "shadowy past" proved romantic; in reality, it hid his real record of service to Moscow (Krivitsky, *In Stalin's Secret Service*, 97; Borkenau, *Spanish Cockpit*, 272–77).



The administration and leadership of the International Brigades was a Comintern operation, and any Comintern operation was by extension a Soviet operation.<sup>22</sup>

The Brigades' rank and file, however, included men and women of all nationalities, ages, and political persuasions, many of whom remained unaware of the USSR's deep involvement in their efforts. Arthur Koestler goes too far when he accuses the NKVD and the Comintern of establishing "a white-slave traffic whose victims were young idealists flirting with violence," but there is a grain of truth in his statement.<sup>23</sup> Most soldiers in the Brigades had, wittingly or unwittingly, been recruited by Communist parties or their front agencies. And although many volunteers who knowingly joined through Communist parties did so merely to get to Spain, and not for ideological reasons, the USSR was, by extension, responsible for their presence.<sup>24</sup> As a result, many former Brigadists who sincerely protest that they were not "drafted by the Reds" are, in essence, mistaken.

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22. Krivitsky, *In Stalin's Secret Service*, 74, and Franz Borkenau, *World Communism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1939) both mention Stalin's famous remark that the Comintern was nothing more than his private little shop ("lavochka"). Also, Jesús Tomás Hernández, one of the two Communist ministers in the Republican cabinet, reports in *Yo, ministro de Stalin en España* (Madrid: NOS, 1954), 212, that the Brigades were disbanded in September 1938 by the order of Stalin himself.

23. Arthur Koestler, in *The God That Failed*, ed. Richard Crossman (New York: Harper & Row, 1949), 37.

24. David T. Cattell, *Communism and the Spanish Civil War* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1955), 82–83, describes the "worldwide recruiting network" involved in gathering manpower for the Brigades. In doing so, he follows the lead of Krivitsky, *In Stalin's Secret Service*, 93–98, who states that every recruit had been screened by the NKVD, which had at least one agent in the central committee of every Communist party in the world. Furthermore, Krivitsky asserts that all volunteers forfeited their passports, which the NKVD confiscated. Like many of Krivitsky's claims, this argument is somewhat overstated. Although non-Communist participants in the International Brigades are naive to deny Soviet influence, they would surely have noticed such blatant interference. See Robert G. Colodny, *The Struggle for Madrid* (New York: Paine-Whitman, 1958); George Hills, *The Battle for Madrid* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977); and Verle B. Johnston, *Legions of Babel* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1967), all of whom deny or downplay Soviet influence in the Brigades. Also, Louis Fischer, the first American to serve in the Brigades, knew more about Soviet involvement with the International Brigades than most (he eventually became the quartermaster general for the Brigades), and insists that neither he nor anyone he knew swore any oaths to or accepted payment from the Soviet Union (*Men and Politics*, 386–87). On the other hand, George Orwell states in *Homage to Catalonia* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 65, 117, that the "Communists" firmly controlled the International Brigades. Orwell had been sent to Spain by the English International Labour Party, and hoped to join the Brigades before becoming disillusioned by the "May Days" in Barcelona. He notes that a recommendation from a member of the Communist Party was necessary in order to join the International Brigades.

Estimates regarding the number of men who fought in the Brigades vary wildly from 15,000 to 200,000. Part of the confusion stems from the fact that approximately 20,000 foreigners served in Spain in various non-military or auxiliary capacities, but did not join the Brigades.<sup>25</sup> An average of the most reasonable estimates reveals that 30,000 to 40,000 volunteers fought for the International Brigades, with no more than 18,000 to 20,000 present at any moment. Table 3 compares these estimates.<sup>26</sup>

**Table 3. The International Brigades:  
Numbers and Nationalities**

	<i>Meshcheriakov</i>	<i>Maidanik</i>	<i>Thomas</i>
France	8,500	8,778	10,000
Poland	5,000	3,034	***
Germany	5,000	2,180	5,000
Italy	4,000	2,908	3,350
USA	3,000	2,274	2,800
Great Britain	2,000	1,806	2,000
Australia	2,000	***	***
Canada	***	510	1,000
Belgium	2,000	1,701	***
Yugoslavia	1,600	2,056	1,200
Czechoslovakia	1,300	1,046	***
Hungary	1,000	510	1,000
Cuba	850	***	***
Switzerland	700	406	***
Scandinavia	900	662	1,000
Balts/Finns	***	862	1,000
Others	***	1,072	5,000

25. Thomas, *Spanish Civil War*, 637.

26. Meshcheriakov, *Ispanskaia respublika*, 56-63; Thomas, *Spanish Civil War*, 637; and K. L. Maidanik, *Ispanskii proletariat v natsional'no-revoliutsionnoi voine* (Moscow: Nauka, 1960), 206. Maidanik takes his figures from Soviet Army Archives (TsGASA, *fond* 899, *delo* 35082). Seven brigades were formed, each with three or four battalions. The first was the XI (Thaelmann), composed mainly of German-speaking troops. Next came the XII (Garibaldi), mostly Italian. The third, the XIII (Dombrowski), consisted of Poles and other Slavs. The XIV (Marseillaise) was mostly French, while the XV (Washington-Lincoln) included Americans, British, Canadians, and Australians. Two other brigades, the 129th and 150th, contained a mixture of Balkan and East European troops. None of the Brigades, however, was neatly delineated in practice.

The second mistake involving Soviet personnel lies in the perception by most scholars and many participants that the Soviet presence in Spain was a unified and single-minded force aimed at one goal. In reality, the group contained several different elements and suffered tremendous division. The principal split occurred between the NKVD officers and their rivals in the GRU.

The GRU assumed responsibility for the Soviet military operations in Spain. It coordinated the activities of Soviet combatants, advised Spanish officers, and trained Spanish troops, both in Spain and in the USSR.<sup>27</sup> The head of the GRU himself, Ian Karlovich Berzin, came to Madrid to serve as the head adviser and chief of staff; his assistant, Vladimir Efimovich Gorev, held the position of military *attache*. Both men returned to Moscow and perished there in the purges.<sup>28</sup> Grigori Mikhailovich Shtern succeeded Berzin in April 1937 and served until August 1938, until K. M. Kachanov replaced him. Gorev remained in Spain until April 1938, when General Ivan S. Konev took his place. Finally, General I. G. Kulik succeeded Konev.<sup>29</sup>

Like Konev, many other officers in Spain became famous during and after World War II. Soviet advisers on the general staff or attached to important Spanish officers became known as "*amigos*"; the Spanish humorously called lower-ranking Soviets "*Mexicanos*" or "*gallegos*" (Galicians). Among the *amigos* were future generals and marshals Konstantin Rokossovskii ("Miguel

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27. Non-Soviet observers during the war remained unaware of the details of the Soviet command structure in Spain. In addition to the many memoirs detailing the Soviet experience in Spain, S. Liubarskii, *Nekotorye operativno-takticheskie vyvody iz opyta voiny v Ispanii* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1939), 5, and a pamphlet printed by the Soviet general staff, *Upravlenie voiskami i rabota shtabov v Ispanskoj respublikanskoj armii* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1939), 6–7, 21, help clear up some of the confusion.

28. For decades, Berzin and Gorev have been mistakenly identified as one and the same man. This mistake stems from the work of Robert Colodny, who served in the Lincoln Brigade and assumed that "Berzin," "Grishin," "Gorev," and "Grigorevich" were different code names for one individual, who was replaced by General Konev (*The Struggle for Madrid*, 162–65). In turn, Thomas accepted this observation and perpetuated it in his history of the war, which has been accepted as the definitive work for years. Berzin, a Latvian whose real name was Kiuzis Peteris, recruited Gorev, born Iakov Mrachkovskii, into the GRU; he also recruited the famous Richard Sorge. Jesús Hernández, *Yo, ministro*, 16, 72–73, 167–68; and Louis Fischer, *Men and Politics*, 361–62, 412, 427, make mention of them both. Viktor Suvorov, *Inside Soviet Military Intelligence* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), 14, 276, describes them as well. Berzin can be found in the *Sovetskaia voennaia entsiklopediia* (1976), 1: 453 (he is not to be mistaken for Eduard Berzin, the NKVD officer who served as the first head of the infamous *Dal'stroi*, which administrated the Kolyma prison camps; the two are often confused). Finally, photographs of both men can be found in *Leningradtsy v Ispanii* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1974). In fairness to Colodny, Berzin and Gorev bore a close resemblance to each other physically.

29. *Solidarnost'*, 254–56. Also, Meshcheriakov, *Ispanskaia respublika*, 48–54. Berzin's *nom de guerre* was "Grishen" (sometimes "Starik"), while Gorev went by "van Rosen." Shtern was "Grigorevich," and Kachanov became "Maximov." Konev used the name "Borov," and Kulik was "Cooper."

Martínez"), Kirill Meretkov ("Diadia Petrovich"), A. I. Rodimtsev ("Pablito"), Mikhail Nedelin ("Marshal N."), Pavel Batov ("Fritz"), and Rodion Manilovskii ("Manolito"). Other *amigos* included chief aviation adviser Iakov Smushkevich ("Douglas"), naval adviser Nikolai Kuznetsov ("Kolia"), artillery expert Nikolai Voronov ("Voltaire"), and tank specialist Dmitrii Pavlov ("Pablo"). Judji-Umar Mamsurov ("Ksanty-Hajji") and I. G. Starinov ("Wolf") trained Spaniards in guerrilla and partisan warfare. Finally, General Akulov headed the GRU branch in Barcelona, working under Old Bolshevik Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, the USSR's "trade consul" in that city.<sup>30</sup>

Whereas the GRU struggled for a straightforward military victory against Franco and the Fascists, the NKVD had different priorities. Although it trained guerrillas and partisans like the GRU, the NKVD concerned itself primarily with two goals. The first involved ferreting out rebel spies from the ranks of the Loyalists. During his march to Madrid, Insurgent General Emilio Mola coined an immortal phrase by boasting that his greatest weapon against the Republic was not any of the four columns he was leading to the city, but the "Fifth Column": the rebel sympathizers and agents already within the capital. This was no idle threat, and the Republic desperately needed the NKVD's counterintelligence expertise. The NKVD created and trained a secret police force for the Republic, the *Servicio de Investigación Militar* (SIM), and, for a time, the efforts of both proved invaluable.

Unfortunately for the Republic, the NKVD's second goal in Spain was less altruistic. The NKVD contingent, led by Abram Slutskii and Alexander Orlov, labored from the start to gain control over the Spanish Communist Party and to infiltrate the Republican government.<sup>31</sup> Stalin wanted absolute compliance from the Republic in return for his assistance, and charged the

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30. This list of Soviet commanders has been compiled from *Solidarnost'*; Il'ia Ehrenburg, *Eve of War* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1963); A. I. Gusev, *Gnevnoe nebo Ispanii* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1973); *Oni srazhalis' s nami* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1976); A. I. Rodimtsev, *Pod nebom Ispanii* and *Dobrovol'tsy-internatsionalisty* (Sverdlovsk: 1976); *Pod znamenem Ispanskoi respubliki* (Moscow: Nauka, 1965); *Vmeste s patriotami Ispanii* (Kiev: Politicheskaiia literatura, 1986); Hills, *Battle*, 68-69, 83-91, 101-2, 122-24; Colodny, *Struggle*, 47; and Fischer, *Men and Politics*, 225-26, 398-99.

31. Abram Slutskii ("Marcos"), described as a likable, ungainly man, headed the NKVD Foreign Department. He was recalled to Moscow in September 1936 and shot. See Hernandez, *Yo, ministro*, 81-88; and Elizabeth K. Poretzky, *Our Own People* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1969), 110, 124, 148-50. Leon Lazarevich Feldbin, better known to the world as Alexander Orlov, took over operations in Spain and defected to the US during the war. His *Handbook of Intelligence and Guerrilla Warfare* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1963) describes Orlov's part in training Spanish guerrillas with pride, but he avoids details about his other duties there in *The Secret History of Stalin's Crimes* (New York: Random House, 1953). For more details on Orlov, see the recent biography of him by John Costello and Oleg Tsarev, *Deadly Illusions* (New York: Crown, 1993).

NKVD with forcing that compliance, even after Stalin's imperatives in Spain began to diverge sharply from those of the Loyalists.

The GRU and the secret police had been constant enemies since the formation of the GRU in 1918. The two agencies quarreled over manpower and budget allocation, and had engaged in a cycle of reciprocal blood purges since 1919. The NKVD and the GRU would have experienced friction in Spain under the best of circumstances. The fact that Stalin's changing attitudes toward the Spanish war divided them further only worsened the relationship.<sup>32</sup>

### FAILURE OR BETRAYAL?

Today we know the aftermath. . . . We know how Russia prolonged the agony of Spain by sending just enough supplies to keep the war going until agreement with Nazi Germany was in sight; we know how she used Spain as a convenient killer's lane to get rid of Anarchists, Trotskyites, and other political undesirables. (Koestler)<sup>33</sup>

The USSR has been portrayed as the heroic, if unsuccessful, defender of the Spanish Republic and as its worst betrayer. Both images have truth to them. Not until the Soviet Union became actively involved in Spain did Stalin realize the impossibility of winning the war. Continuing the operation, however, opened other alternatives to him. Stalin's scheming explains the many-sided perception of the Soviets in the eyes of the Spanish and the non-Communists fighting for the International Brigades. For the most part, Soviet military officers and civilian auxiliaries were well-regarded. At the worst, Soviet troops and advisers came across as rude or aloof, but not as traitorous.

On the other hand, NKVD officers, and those suspected of working with the secret police, were generally feared and disliked, especially as the war progressed and the Republic's hopes for victory waned. The popularity of the entire Soviet presence in Spain declined as the brutality of the NKVD and the manipulateness of Stalin's intentions became apparent, but the secret police had never enjoyed that popularity to begin with.

The arrival of Soviet aid filled the Republic with hope and excitement in 1936. Over time, that excitement soured, as the inadequacy—and the price—of Soviet assistance became clear. But the bitterness with which the Spanish and the soldiers of the International Brigades remember the USSR's role in the

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32. Viktor Suvorov, a high-ranking officer who defected from the GRU, has the most to say about the historic enmity between his agency and the secret police, in *Inside Soviet Military Intelligence*.

33. Arthur Koestler, *The Invisible Writing* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 325.

war should not obscure two facts. Without Soviet aid, the Republic would have fallen in 1936. Secondly, the USSR assisted the Republic alone, at great risk, and against all odds. An even-handed examination of the Soviet part in the Spanish Civil War must address two fundamental questions: how did the Soviet Union help the Republic, and how did it come to use the Republic for its own purposes?

Had the USSR tried in earnest to win the war, it would have been hard-pressed to do so. Not only did the Soviet Union's lack of allies and its distance from Spain handicap its efforts, but the Republican coalition itself was becoming unglued during the war. As Ehrenburg noted,

The Republic was defended by men of the most varied of opinions: Communists, Catalan autonomists, Socialists—both of the left and right—bourgeois Republicans, Basque Catholics, POUMists, united only in their hatred of Fascism. . . . The Catalans and Basques denounced the "Great-Power practices of Madrid," the POUMists demanded a "deepening of the revolution," the right-wing Socialists, headed by Prieto, criticized the left-wing Socialist Largo Caballero; the Republicans looked askance at the Communists, the Anarchists swore to destroy the state they hated.<sup>34</sup>

Manuel Azaña, the president of the Republic, and a decided moderate, headed the weak Left Republican party. He failed to inspire the radical masses, but he served as a respectable figurehead for a government increasingly portrayed as Communist by Dr. Goebbels' propaganda machine.

The two largest parties in the Republican bloc were the Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*: PSOE) and the Anarchists. The PSOE had split into three wings: the Left, the Center, and the Right. Julián Besteiro's Right Socialists had no political clout, so the real struggle took place between Francisco Largo Caballero's Left Socialists and Indalecio Prieto's Center Socialists. Prieto was a skilled bureaucrat and served as the minister of air and navy.

Largo Caballero's primary strength was his great charisma. Head of the Left Socialists, he also led the immense General Trade Union (*Unión General de Trabajadores*: UGT). Although he lacked administrative skills, his support

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34. Ehrenburg, *Eve of War*, 118. To underscore this point, Louis Fischer, *Men and Politics*, 423, describes a moment at a July 1937 party hosted by the new prime minister, Juan Negrín. Jesús Hernández, the Communist minister of education, leaned over to Indalecio Prieto, head of the Center Socialists, and whispered, "You know, Prieto, just a while ago I was plotting to kill you." Prieto laughed heartily and replied, "*Bueno, camarada, bueno!*" Unfortunately, the factionalism which plagued the Republic was rarely so amusing.

among the masses made him Azana's choice as prime minister. Largo Caballero has been praised for his energy, forthrightness, and bravery, but his vanity and stubbornness impaired his ability to lead the war effort.<sup>35</sup> In May 1937, he stepped down, largely under pressure brought to bear by the Soviets.

The Anarchists outnumbered the Socialists, and loosely organized themselves into a dual structure. The Spanish Anarchist Federation (*Federación Anarquista Ibérica*: FAI) served as the political wing of the party, while the Anarcho-Syndicalist Trade Union (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*: CNT) represented it within the labor force. Initially reluctant to join the Republican government, the Anarchists brought numbers and enthusiasm to the coalition. The CNT-FAI's volatility and lack of discipline, however, often made the Anarchists more of a liability than an asset. Their military record was poor; only one Anarchist leader, Buenaventura Durruti, accepted the idea of discipline within military units, and his men shot him in the back for trying to implement this peculiar notion. The CNT-FAI, justifiably suspicious that the Republic would attempt to suppress it after the war, spent most of its time hoarding weapons and trying to stir up revolution.

Spain's "second city," Barcelona had always been a hotbed of revolution, due in part to the strong strain of Catalan separatism there. Luckily, Luis Companys, the leader of the majority in Catalonia's *Generalitat*, advocated cooperation with Madrid against the Fascist threat. The CNT-FAI, however, enjoyed great support in Catalonia, and yet another divisive element appeared there. This was the small but active Workers' Party of Marxist Unity (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*: POUM), founded by Joaquín Maurín and Andrés Nin. POUM's extreme leftism and Nin's previous friendship with Leon Trotsky brought on accusations of "Trotskyism" and treason, although both Trotsky and Nin disavowed any connection with each other during the war. POUM denounced Soviet activity in Spain as reactionary, and the NKVD established a "true" socialist party in Barcelona, the United Catalan Socialist-Communist Party (*Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya*: PSUC) to counter and eventually destroy POUM.

Very little can be said about the Spanish Communist Party (*Partido Comunista de España*: PCE) until the arrival of the Soviets. Soviet and PCE sources claim that the PCE numbered 30,000 to 50,000 in the spring of 1936, but even this paltry figure exaggerates the Communists' strength. The PCE probably had 3,000 to 4,000 members; it certainly performed poorly in

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35. José Martín Blázquez, one of the few officers who remained loyal to the Republic, and one of the few objective voices among the participants writing about the war, predicted that "a day will come when [Largo Caballero] will be recognized as the man who has done more harm to Spain than anyone else since Philip II." See *I Helped to Build an Army* (London: Seeker & Warburg, 1939), 131.

the February elections, winning only 16 of the 485 seats in the *Cortes*.<sup>36</sup> Among the Communist leaders, only Dolores Ibárruri, a powerful orator better known as *La Pasionaria*, enjoyed nationwide recognition. The arrival of Soviet aid, however, boosted the PCE's prestige greatly. Membership soared to over 200,000 by February 1937, and the Communists gained two seats in the Republican cabinet.<sup>37</sup>

Against this backdrop, the newly-arrived Soviets prepared to rescue Madrid. After taking Toledo in late September, the Nationalists advanced to the outskirts of western Madrid. Franco's forces began airstrikes and artillery bombardments on October 6, and reached the edge of the city a month later. On November 6, Largo Caballero transferred the government to Valencia, leaving Madrid under the command of General José Miaja and the Republican Defense Junta. The following day, however, the sudden and seemingly miraculous appearance of the International Brigades and the first Soviet fighter planes halted the rebel assault. By the end of November, the defenders had beaten the Nationalists back, and both armies prepared for a prolonged siege.

Unarguably, the Soviets saved the Republican cause in November 1936. Had Franco taken Madrid, he would certainly have won the war quickly. Instead of a rapid victory, the Insurgents now faced the task of surrounding the capital and conquering the eastern half of Spain. Meanwhile, the Soviets were providing the Republic with new arms every day and transforming the popular militias into real armies.

Soviet assistance did not come without strings attached, however. First of all, Stalin demanded financial compensation. On October 22, Soviet agents transported 50 metric tons of gold, 60 percent of the Republic's bullion reserves, to Moscow. The value of the shipment has been estimated at \$600,000,000, and the USSR kept every penny.<sup>38</sup>

In addition, Soviet advisers sought to control the way the Republic waged war. In one respect, this made perfect sense. With the exception of the PCE's Fifth Regiment, the men fighting for the Republic had little discipline and no military training. Martin Blazquez, himself an ardent anti-communist, praises

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36. See José Díaz, *Tres Años de Lucha* (Paris: Ebro, 1970), for inflated PCE numbers. Carr, *Comintern*, 1-9, questions PCE membership claims, but allows for as many as 8,000 to 10,000 members. Borkenau, *Spanish Cockpit*, 190-97; and Brennan, *Spanish Labyrinth*, 303-06, favor the smaller figures. For the rise in membership, see Borkenau, *ibid*.

37. Jesús Hernández became minister of education. Highly resentful of the Soviets, he founded an independent "Titoist" party after World War II. Vicente Uribe received the post of minister of agriculture (Thomas, *Spanish Civil War*, 620).

38. The figure of \$600,000,000 has been widely accepted, although Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 350-52, prefers Burnett Bolloten's estimate of \$518 million. Whether the Republican government shipped its gold to the USSR in order to pay for Soviet aid or merely to safeguard it is a matter of debate. See note 60.



the PCE and the Soviets for introducing some semblance of military rationale to the troops.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, Soviet military discipline fared poorly in Spain for two reasons. First, Soviet advisers tended to be overly domineering. This problem frequently occurs between military advisers and their proteges, and comes as no surprise in this instance. The Soviets arrived at a moment of crisis, and their first aim was to stabilize the situation, not to coddle the egos of their Spanish counterparts. After saving Madrid, Soviet advisers retained tight control over military operations, again for practical reasons. Training pilots and tank drivers took six months to a year; until they had qualified enough Spaniards to use Soviet equipment, the Russians fought the war as if it were their own. As the Republican ambassador to France recalled,

... the Air Force, directed by the Russians, operated when and where they pleased, without any coordination with the land and naval forces. The Navy and Air Minister, Indalecio Prieto, meek and cynical, made fun of his office, declaring that he was neither a minister nor anything else, because he received absolutely no obedience from the Air Force. The real Air Minister was the Russian General Douglas.<sup>40</sup>

Not all advisers acted in such an overbearing manner, and Soviet military personnel began to hand over more authority and control to Spanish generals as the initial crisis passed.

The second and more serious problem involved a clash between popular Spanish and official Soviet visions of how the war should be fought. The Anarchists and Left Socialists wanted to carry out a comprehensive social revolution while fighting Franco's forces. The Soviets, along with the more moderate elements within the Republican government, considered this idea to be political suicide and military insanity. State-sanctioned revolution would completely discredit the Republic as "Red" in the eyes of the world, and the USSR, concerned above all with its plans for collective security, was particularly anxious to avoid that stigma. Furthermore, a full-scale social revolution would have undone whatever progress the Republic had made in shaping its army into a regular fighting force.

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39. Martín Blázquez, *I Helped*, 120–28. Wintringham, *English Captain*, 29, joins him in noting the "low ebb" of military capacity among the Republic's troops. The Communist Fifth Regiment grew from 8,000 in July 1936 to over 60,000. Only half of the Regiment's soldiers were actually Communists, however; many men joined simply because of its reputation as the only effective Spanish battalion. Spanish military leaders used the Fifth Regiment as the backbone for the Republican Army, splitting it up and mixing its units into other regiments.

40. Ambassador Luis Araquistáin is cited by Bolloten, in *The Grand Camouflage* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), 120–25. "General Douglas," of course, is Iakov Smushkevich.

As leader of the Left Socialists, prime minister Largo Caballero fully backed the idea of revolution. His attitude is obvious in this editorial for the Left Socialist gazette, *Claridad*:

Some persons are saying: "Let us crush fascism first, let us finish the war victoriously, and then there will be time to speak of revolution and to make it if necessary." Those who express themselves in this way have obviously not reflected maturely upon the formidable dialectical process which is carrying us all along. The war and the revolution are one and the same thing. Not only do they not exclude or hinder each other, but they complement and support each other. . . . The revolution is economic annihilation of fascism, and is consequently the first step towards its military annihilation.<sup>41</sup>

Despite pressure from the Comintern and from Moscow, Largo Caballero refused to alter his stance.<sup>42</sup>

Had the Soviet intervention remained a strictly military operation, the Russians might have been able to overcome this problem. But by the spring of 1937, the heady days of Dolores Ibárruri's fiery speeches and the crowd's answering shouts of "*No pasarán!*" (They shall not pass!) had faded. By this time, Stalin realized that the French and British would not change their minds and help him. Neither were the Germans and Italians intimidated by the Republic's stiffened resistance. In February, Malaga fell almost without resistance to the Nationalists, and the battle of Jarama ended in a bloody stalemate twenty days later. Although the Republic routed a large group of inexperienced Italian troops at Guadalajara in March, the Germans had begun full-scale strategic bombing throughout the country; they pounded Guernica into rubble on April 26, provoking an international outcry.

41. *Claridad*, Aug. 22, 1936. Cited in Bolloten, *Camouflage*, 108-9.

42. See the December 1936 letter from Stalin, Molotov, and Voroshilov to Caballero in Degras, *Soviet Documents*, 229-31. The issue of revolution deeply split the Republic, and opinion on the idea remains divided. George Orwell fought for POUM, which also called for revolution; he defends the idea in *Homage to Catalonia*. Leon Trotsky, in *The Spanish Revolution, 1931-1939* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), agreed. Whaley and Bolloten support this thesis as well. On the other hand, Martín Blázquez, Fischer, and Brenan argue that revolutionary ardor was no substitute for military efficiency, training, and discipline. In his introduction to Martín Blázquez's *I Helped to Build an Army*, Franz Borkenau describes the Republic's "tragic paradox": that "the attempt to transform revolutionary impulses so as to make them useful for the creation of an army of the Cromwell or Carnot type has failed in Spain." Borkenau notes that the Republic tried to create three armies in succession: a revolutionary army, a totalitarian army, and a non-political army. The first was inefficient, the second alienated the masses, and the third failed to inspire the masses. The real tragedy is that the efforts of the third army were sabotaged by the divergence of Soviet goals from Republican aims.

The Soviet Union could not win the war for the Republic, and Stalin knew it as spring came to an end. Why then did he continue to aid Spain? First of all, Stalin intended to bide his time on the diplomatic front, and a low-intensity war in Spain committed him neither to the West nor the Fascists as he watched the development of international relations on the continent. In addition, the fact that communists and socialists of all types had gravitated to Spain made it convenient for Stalin to export the purges already taking place in the USSR.

By April 1937, Stalin's goal was not to win the war, but merely to prolong it and use Spain as he chose: as a pawn in international politics and as the "killer's lane" of which Koestler would later write. In order to do so, however, Stalin needed a more pliable leader at the head of the Republic. Largo Caballero distrusted the Soviets and threatened to upset Stalin's diplomatic scheming with his revolutionary impulses. The PCE, at the prompting of the NKVD, stepped up its anti-Caballero rhetoric. And in early May, an extraordinary event took place which provided the catalyst for Caballero's downfall: the "May Days" in Barcelona.

From May 3 to May 8, the Anarchists, POUM, the Soviet-backed PSUC, and the Republican Guards—all nominal allies—fought each other in the streets of Barcelona. Tension between the various parties had been mounting in March and April, as the Anarchists and POUM, which had formed a loose coalition, began to stockpile weapons. On May 3, Eusebio Rodríguez Salas, the chief of the Barcelona police and a PSUC member, led a squad of policemen to the *Telefónica*, the city's communications exchange. The Anarchists firmly controlled the *Telefónica*, and Salas claimed to be investigating charges that the CNT-FAI had been monitoring and interfering with vital communications between Barcelona and the command centers of Madrid and Valencia. The Anarchists interpreted the investigation as a government attempt to oust them from the building, and reacted violently. The initial gunplay rapidly escalated into a full-scale conflict, which lasted for several days, until the Valencia government sent a detachment of Civil and Assault Guards to put down the fighting.<sup>43</sup>

Pressure to resign had been mounting against Largo Caballero since the fall of Malaga, and the outbreak of violence among his own troops proved to be the last straw. Loyalty to the radical elements of the Republican coalition, which supported POUM and the CNT-FAI, prompted Largo Caballero to reject the strident calls from the PCE and the Soviets to outlaw POUM. His obstinance on the matter cost him dearly, and he resigned from his post as

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43. The degree to which the Soviets were involved with the Barcelona disturbances is discussed below; see notes 61–64.

prime minister on May 17. That same day, Dr. Juan Negrín, a member of President Azaña's Left Republican party, assumed Caballero's post.

Negrín himself proved an able leader. An excellent administrator, he worked closely with Center Socialist head Prieto, another proficient bureaucrat. The two men streamlined the operation of the Republican government and conducted day-to-day affairs smoothly. But neither man inspired the masses as Caballero had, and Negrín was widely perceived, rightfully or not, as a Soviet puppet. The PSOE and UGT had enthusiastically followed Caballero; they passively accepted Negrín. The Negrín government achieved efficiency and international respectability, but at the cost of the spontaneity and enthusiasm which had driven the Republic during the early days of the war. As Carr puts it,

Something had been gained. But much had also been lost. The spontaneous revolutionary ardor, ill-organized and ill-coordinated though it was, which animated the republican armies in the first autumn and winter of the war, gave place to a dour defensive struggle to avert disaster, which discouraged any visionary hopes or ambitions for the future. . . .<sup>44</sup>

Whether or not the accusations that Negrín was a tool of the USSR were justified, the Soviets did gain tremendous influence in Spain after he assumed office. And it was the NKVD that was increasingly in control of the execution of that policy.

The focus of the secret police's work changed after May 1937. During the first months of the war, the NKVD and the SIM had operated against the military threat posed by Insurgent spies and sympathizers. Now the NKVD intensified its efforts and concentrated on political enemies. Republican Spain became infected with the "spy-disease" which Regler contemptuously referred to as "the Russian syphilis."<sup>45</sup> After taking office, Negrín agreed to outlaw POUM, and the secret police hunted down, tortured, and executed hundreds of POUMists, including the party's leader, Andrés Nin. The secret police soon dominated the entire Republican zone; Madrid alone was honeycombed with over 200 "*checas*," the small prisons and interrogation centers which gained such notoriety during the war.<sup>46</sup> NKVD and SIM agents of all nationalities

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44. Carr, *Comintern*, 45-51.

45. Gustav Regler, *The Owl of Minerva* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Cudahy, 1959), 293.

46. The term *checa* comes from the Spanish rendering of the Soviet "*Cheka*." Hills, *Battle*, 44-46, describes the *checas* as practically in competition with each other to fulfill quotas of victims. The SIM was incompetent as well as bloodthirsty; a character in Hemingway's *The Fifth Column* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 36-37, says of the SIM that "they work very hard, and aren't awfully efficient . . . they kill a lot of people that they shouldn't kill."

infiltrated the army, the International Brigades, and the civilian populace, searching for Trotskyites, Anarchists, or any potential opponents.<sup>47</sup> Orlov's remark to Hernández that "It is enough to be an anti-communist" indicates how easy it was to become a victim of the secret police.<sup>48</sup>

The Soviet camp fell victim to the NKVD as well, as the backlash following the Tukhachevskii trial in June 1937 reached Spain. Officer after officer received orders to return to the USSR, where arrest, trial, and, often, execution awaited; Hemingway and Regler are but two observers to describe the regular "farewell parties" at the Gaylord Hotel, the center of Soviet life in Madrid.<sup>49</sup> The NKVD had razed the GRU in Moscow "down to the lavatory attendants and cooks,"<sup>50</sup> and the same happened throughout Spain in 1937 and 1938.

Understandably, the terror took its toll on Republican morale and military effectiveness. So did the increase in Soviet willingness to strongarm the Spanish. During this time, the USSR became far more willing to use the threat of withdrawal to bludgeon the Negrín government into acceding to its demands.<sup>51</sup> Even compliance, however, was not enough: the level of aid decreased during the last half of 1937 and trickled almost to a halt in 1938.<sup>52</sup>

There were plausible reasons for this curtailment. The NIC had increased pressure upon the Soviet Union to halt assistance to Spain, forbidding even the presence of "volunteers" on Spanish soil. In addition, Nationalist, German, and Italian naval patrols added some pressure of their own by hounding Soviet ships and turning the Mediterranean into a veritable militarized zone.

Orwell, *Homage*, 212, echoed this point as he and his wife escaped from Spain after being outlawed with the rest of the POUMists: "Fortunately this was Spain and not Germany. The Spanish secret police had some of the spirit of the Gestapo, but not much of its competence."

47. One of the most notorious non-Soviet agents in the Brigades was George Mink, an American who often boasted of being in the pay of the NKVD. Mink is suspected of having murdered several Americans in the Washington-Lincoln Brigade, including Jose Robles, a professor of Spanish literature at Johns Hopkins University, who sometimes served as Gorev's translator. See Orlov's testimony before Congress, "Testimony of Alexander Orlov," *Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee of the Judiciary, US Senate, 28 September 1955* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1962), 1-17, as well as any number of works on the KGB.

48. Hernández, *Yo, ministro*, 120-25.

49. Regler, *Owl*, 294-96. Hemingway, who was present at many of these parties, describes them fictionally in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 228-49.

50. Suvorov, *Inside*, 21-24.

51. Indalecio Prieto, who became minister of national defense under Negrín, reported that Soviet ambassador L. Ia. Gaikins conveyed to him that "I would be rewarded or punished according to the attitude I adopted." When Prieto refused to force the Socialists to merge with the PCE, Gaikins cancelled several shipments of arms. See Bolloren, *Camouflage*, 302-05.

52. This remark applies only to military aid. Shipments of non-military materials continued and actually increased.

The Italians expanded their blockade to include ships of all nationalities after the NKVD's ruse of shipping arms on vessels under forged registries became known; only after an Italian submarine torpedoed a British ship did the NIC force Italy to restrict its activities. In addition, Soviet sources claim that the "volunteers" had done all they set out to do: train Spanish troops to operate tanks, aircraft, and artillery; allow Republican officers more initiative in planning tactics and strategy; and help put Spanish industry on an effective war footing.<sup>53</sup> All admirable goals, but hardly convincing as an explanation for the fact that Soviet aid dwindled just at the point when it was needed the most.

The most important reason for the decrease in aid lies, of course, with the shifts in Stalin's policy-making. By the end of 1938, Stalin had little left to gain by prolonging the war, much less attempting to win it. The NKVD had purged his enemies in Spain, and Stalin's diplomatic course became clear after Hitler and Neville Chamberlin reached their infamous agreement in Munich.<sup>54</sup> The Republic's military situation had collapsed as well. The rebels took the north of Spain in October 1937, and pushed forward on all fronts throughout 1938. In September 1938, Stalin ordered the withdrawal of the battered International Brigades. By December, Franco's forces stood ready to take Catalonia.

By 1939, only a few Soviets remained in Spain, and they left quickly. Barcelona fell on January 26, and the *Cortes* met for the last time on February 1. The Republican government fled to France on February 5, and although Negrín returned to Madrid, the revolt of the few officers still loyal to the Republic forced him to leave again on March 5. Franco took Madrid on March 28 and declared victory on April 1. The Spanish Civil War had come to an end.

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53. For example, see *Katalonskaia operatsiia 23 dekabria 1938 g. —9 fevralia 1939 g.: operativno-takicheskii ocherk* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1939), 9–10. Brenan, *Spanish Labyrinth*, 320, mentions that Republican industry fared poorly during the war, except in Barcelona.

54. The position of this article is that Stalin gave thought, however tentatively, to an alliance with Hitler for months before the Munich Agreement of September 1938. Hilger, *Incompatible Allies*, 278–79, 283–87, notes that trade between the USSR and Nazi Germany continued almost normally during years marked by diplomatic antipathy. Paradoxically, "the political enmity of the two countries was so much taken for granted that trade relations were now removed from the realm of controversy and could be discussed with an amount of detachment that made for far greater efficiency." Trade began around April 1935 and continued throughout the Spanish Civil War.

### SKULDUGGERY: WHOM TO BELIEVE?

The greatest difficulty in dealing with this topic lies in the remarkable polarization of opinion surrounding it. The memoirs of participants and observers all contain strong biases, and the scholarly work which has followed perpetuates those prejudices. Writers sympathetic to the Republic typically adopt one of three stances toward the USSR's role in the war.

The first insists that the Soviet Union aided the Loyalists for altruistic reasons and that it interfered little with the internal affairs of the Republic. Authors with this view are naive, misguided, or purposely denying Soviet influence.<sup>55</sup> Diametrically opposed to this attitude is the accusatory position, which argues that the USSR used Spain in the most callous manner possible, either to court Nazi Germany as an ally or to ingratiate itself with Britain and France by quashing social revolution in Spain.<sup>56</sup> Finally, a third group maintains that the USSR entered Spain with mixed intentions and, while using Spain harshly in the end, did not do so initially or with any more malice than other nations typically use their clients.<sup>57</sup>

Clearly, each position affects the way an author views and presents the facts. Moreover, the Spanish Civil War, like most events involving espionage and covert action, generated a substantial amount of "cloak-and-dagger" folklore which persists today. A large measure of the responsibility for this sensationalism rests with NKVD operatives Walter Krivitsky and Alexander Orlov, both of whom defected to the United States during the war. Orlov headed the NKVD contingent in Spain, but mentions few details concerning his work there. Orlov claims that moral revulsion caused him to defect, but admits that realizing Stalin wanted him dead also spurred his decision.<sup>58</sup> If

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55. All Soviet sources fall into this category, and Johnston's *Legions of Babel* does as well. Juan Negrín and Republican foreign minister Alvarez del Vayo insist that the Soviets did not influence Spanish policy, but they were also the non-Communist political figures reputed to be most under the sway of the Soviets.

56. Unsurprisingly, Leon Trotskii, George Orwell, and Arthur Koestler angrily denounce the USSR for its actions in Spain. Burnett Bolloten's *The Grand Camouflage* follows their line, as does Víctor Alba's *Spanish Marxism versus Soviet Communism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988). Jesús Hernández also falls into this category; he developed a deep hatred for the Soviets in Spain, especially for Orlov and the NKVD.

57. David Cattell, George Kennan, and E. H. Carr belong to this group. This essay takes a similar position.

58. Gordon Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Petrels* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 190-224, mentions that Orlov's cousin had been implicated in an anti-Stalin plot. The head of the NKVD's INO warned Orlov of the impending danger, and, shortly thereafter, Orlov spotted a notorious NKVD assassin masquerading as a member of the International Brigades. Orlov gathered a force of German bodyguards and prepared his defection to the West. See also Costello and Tsarev, *Deadly Illusions*, 300-05.

Orlov omits, Krivitsky distorts. Both men exaggerated the sinister tone of their memoirs to attract a wider reading audience, but Krivitsky had the misfortune to fall in with Isaac Don Levine, who resorted to outright untruth while ghostwriting *In Stalin's Secret Service*.<sup>59</sup> Both Orlov and Krivitsky are regarded as fundamentally reliable, but must be read with caution.

This combination of folklore and bias makes work on the war problematic, especially on the topics which drew the most attention or caused the most scandal. The following items illustrate the difficulties generally associated with doing research on the Spanish Civil War.

One of the few matters about which Orlov spoke freely involved the shipment of Spanish gold to the USSR. In a 1966 *Reader's Digest* article, "How Stalin Relieved Spain of \$600,000,000," Orlov told America the lurid tale of Stalin's malicious theft of the Republic's gold reserve, attributing to Stalin the infamous remark, "They will never see their gold again, just as they do not see their ears!" This story became the accepted version of the event, but failed to account for two simple facts. First, the Republic freely agreed to the transfer. Second, the USSR never intended to provide assistance to Spain free of charge. Although the accounts of the Republican officials who authorized the transfer show some confusion, it seems fairly certain that the transfer of gold was intended as an advance payment for Soviet aid.<sup>60</sup>

59. In his introduction to the 1985 edition of Krivitsky's memoirs, William J. Hood describes Levine's liberties with the truth. Levine "promoted" Krivitsky from captain and head *resident* in the Netherlands to general and "Head of Soviet Intelligence, Western Europe." Krivitsky reportedly objected to both lies as well as to the melodramatic style of the book. Krivitsky died in a Washington, DC, hotel room on February 9, 1941, in an apparent suicide. Since he was preparing to testify before Congress on matters which could have exposed the fledgling Kim Philby-Donald Maclean Cambridge ring, many suspect that the NKVD murdered Krivitsky (for example, police investigators found not one, but two suicide notes in Krivitsky's room). The mysterious circumstances surrounding his death have tended to convince readers that every word Krivitsky wrote was true: "he must have been telling the truth, or they wouldn't have killed him!" If the NKVD did assassinate Krivitsky, however, it was for what he could still tell, not for what he had already told. Incidentally, Kim Philby, already in the pay of the Soviets, was in Spain during the war, using his position as a London Times correspondent to spy on the Franco camp. See *ibid.*, 170-74.

60. For Orlov's story, see *Reader's Digest* (Nov. 1966). Krivitsky, *In Stalin's Secret Service*, 113-14, joins him in interpreting the transfer as a swindle, as do Costello and Tsarev, *Deadly Illusions*, 258-64. On the other hand, Fischer, who served as quartermaster general of the International Brigades, calculated that the USSR sent approximately \$720,000,000 in arms, food, and raw material to Spain (*Men and Politics*, 364-65). Accepting the value of the gold shipment to be \$600,000,000, Fischer notes that the Republic still owed the Soviets a substantial amount of money after the gold had been spent. Largo Caballero makes no accusations of theft or fraud in his memoirs (*Mis recuerdos*, 203-04, cited in Bolloten, 123-24); after the transfer, he and Negrin, then finance minister, drew regularly upon the Republic's credit balance with the USSR. Alvarez del Vayo states in *The Last Optimist*, 283-85, that Largo Caballero and Negrin both agreed to the transfer and told Prieto of it, while Bolloten argues that Prieto



Thanks to George Orwell, the street fighting in Barcelona in May 1937 remains one of the most notorious events of the war. To what degree did the Soviets cause it? Some authors interpret the event as one step in a Soviet master plan to eradicate POUM, discredit Largo Caballero, and elevate Juan Negrín to power.<sup>61</sup> Jesús Hernández describes an extraordinary session of the PCE executive committee in early April.<sup>62</sup> General secretary José Díaz, Dolores Ibárruri, Vicente Uribe, and Hernandez represented the PCE. The Comintern troika of Codovilla, Stepanov, and Togliatti attended, as did André Marty, the French Communist in charge of the International Brigades' political affairs. Alexander Orlov also came.

The meeting reached its climax when Togliatti relayed Stalin's direct orders that Largo Caballero had to be removed, by assassination if necessary. Díaz and Hernández protested, insisting that the PCE was no mere adjunct of Moscow. Marty, Togliatti, and Orlov overrode their objections, and the PCE accepted the orders. The next task involved choosing Caballero's successor. Prieto seemed too intractable, while Alvarez del Vayo was regarded as too obviously pro-Communist, so Negrín, with his Left Republican respectability, remained as the best choice.

Caballero would not step down, however, despite the increased criticism directed at him after the military reverses of early 1937. Orwell and Hernández postulate that the Soviets deliberately provoked the fighting in Barcelona to help remove Caballero; Hernández reports that, after Andrés Nin was dead and Caballero out of office, Orlov sent Stalin a telegram with the message "*consumatum est*."<sup>63</sup>

That the Soviets prompted the investigation of the *Telefónica* is not implausible, but neither was the investigation without justification. Anarchist activity in Barcelona did disrupt Republican efforts. That the Soviets intended the investigation as some kind of provocation may be true, but it is highly improbable that they had a detailed, concrete plan leading from Salas' first knock on the *Telefónica* door to Caballero's downfall—the conflict unfolded in such a chaotic and unpredictable fashion as to make

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remained unaware of the transfer. Bolloten, hostile to the USSR, cites the Spanish leaders in such a way as to make them appear victimized. True, Alvarez del Vayo's sympathies lay with the USSR, and Negrín's testimony is similarly suspect. But Largo Caballero, who had little love for the Soviets, would certainly have spoken out if he felt the USSR had rooked his government of a fortune.

61. See Hernández, *Yo, ministro*. Alba and Bolloten also agree with this view.

62. Hernández, *Yo, ministro*, 97-102, is the only person to describe this meeting. No other participant has denied or confirmed Hernandez's account, which has become generally accepted. On the other hand, Hernandez's extreme bitterness toward the USSR calls his objectivity into question.

63. *Ibid.*, 105.

planning impossible. Certainly, the Soviets capitalized upon the confusion after it occurred, but they could hardly have caused it, shaped it, and directed it with such unerring accuracy.<sup>64</sup>

Negrín's assumption of power raises the question of Soviet influence within the Republican government. Clearly the PCE operated under the firm control of the USSR. But did Spain's prime minister owe his office to Moscow? Certainly the Soviets preferred Negrín to any other candidate for leadership. But, after Largo Caballero, Negrín was by any standard the most natural choice for the office: he was a member of the president's party, and he held the powerful post of finance minister. The facts that the Soviets wanted Negrín as prime minister and that Negrín *did* become prime minister do not by themselves constitute a causal chain. To the extent that the Soviets can be held responsible for the ouster of Largo Caballero, they can be credited with Negrín's promotion. But, without proof, no more.

As for Negrín's conduct in office, it is true that he struck up close friendships with several Russians, especially Artur Stashevskii, a "trade envoy" to Spain and a personal friend to Stalin. And while in office, Negrín yielded to Soviet pressure far more readily than Largo Caballero had. Hernández and Barea, among others, insist that Negrín acted spinelessly and might as well have been in Soviet pay, even if he was not.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, Alvarez del Vayo argues that Negrín was completely independent, as do PCE leaders Díaz and Ibárruri.<sup>66</sup> Judging to what extent Negrín was subservient to Moscow is impossible. Negrín may have had a genuine affinity with the Soviets; but just as likely is the fact that circumstances and the Republic's dependence on Soviet arms left him with "no alternative but to sup with the devil."<sup>67</sup>

The number of uncertainties surrounding these and other questions makes research on the Soviet role in the Spanish Civil War vexing at times, but not impossible. Approaching the topic with logic, an open mind, and a broad knowledge of the existing sources allows us to determine what can be considered certain, what can be considered probable, and what should be discarded as unlikely or untrue.

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64. George Orwell, who became and remained virulently anti-PCE and anti-Soviet after the events of May 1937, judiciously maintains that the Communists did not plan the actual fighting, but that their actions provoked it, and that they took advantage of it once it began.

65. Hernández, *Yo, ministro*, 97-102; Arturo Barea, *The Forging of a Rebel* (New York: Viking, 1972), 68-69. See also Krivitsky, *In Stalin's Secret Service*, 99-101; and Trotsky, *Spanish Revolution*, 306. Orwell's position is also clear: throughout *Homage to Catalonia*, he maintains that the "Negrín-Prieto government" was Communist (see especially chapters 5 and 11). Orwell's work has many merits, but its interchangeable equation of the Soviets, the PCE, and the Republican government is not among them.

66. See Alvarez del Vayo, *Last Optimist*, 287-92; and Hills, *Battle*, 68-69.

67. Bolloten, *Camouflage*, 302-5.

In addition, some of the answers may lie in recently opened Russian archives. Access to the Central State Archive of the Soviet Army is now possible, and previous work by Soviet historians indicates that it contains a great deal of material concerning the Spanish Civil War. The Central Party Archive in the former Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute (now the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Recent History) contains the personal *fonds* of Comintern officials who played important parts in Spain, including André Marty and Palmiro Togliatti. Speculation and rumor have shaped the history of the Spanish Civil War for far too long, but perhaps that can now be remedied.

We were condemned in advance. (PCE member Arturo Barea)<sup>68</sup>

It is axiomatic of covert or overt military aid that the country receiving assistance depends far more on its supplier than its supplier does on it, and that the recipient has a much higher stake in the conflict it is fighting than does the supplier. In addition, the country supplying the aid invariably demands a price, whether it be material concessions or the subjugation of the recipient's national policy to its own.

This simple dynamic became hyperextended between the Soviet Union and Republican Spain. Normal frictions escalated disproportionately, due to the high diplomatic stakes in Europe and the degree to which Stalin was willing to take advantage of the Republic. After a brief period of relatively sincere assistance, Stalin betrayed the Republic to further his foreign policy goals and to expand the struggle against his political enemies. As Isaac Deutscher aptly describes, Stalin "conducted from the Kremlin a civil war within the Spanish Civil War," and in doing so, he "saved nobody's respectability and he antagonized everybody."<sup>69</sup>

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68. Barea, *Forging*, 491.

69. Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), 423-25.