# THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

## *A Prelude to WWII*

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*“I sent [to General Francisco Franco] a large part of my transport fleet and a number of experimental fighter units, bombers and anti-aircraft guns, and in that way I had an opportunity to ascertain,1 under combat conditions, whether the material was equal to the task...”*

— Hermann Goering, the commander of the German Air Force, testifying in 1946 before the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal about how he used the Spanish Civil War to test the readiness of new weaponry and crews for World War II

**A NOT-SO-CIVIL WAR**

The Spanish Civil War, which in the late 1930s ravaged a big part of the Iberian Peninsula, was — among other things — a misnomer.

It was not, as the name implies, a one-country event disconnected from the rest of Europe; rather, for some of the participants, it was a rehearsal for their role in World War II.

Secondly, while it was fought in Spain, it had three other key participants — Nazi Germany, the Communist Soviet Union, and Fascist Italy — and the combatants included volunteers or regular troops from 53 nations.

Finally, there was nothing “civil” about the way the war was fought — “brutal” or “savage” are much more accurate descriptives.

If that makes the war sound chaotic, it’s because it was; chaos was dominant in Spain at least since the 19th century, when the country’s military and political parties took turns staging coups3 against the ruling monarchy. In 1931, the last Spanish king fled into exile and the leftist rebels, who won a majority in the Parliament, established a republic. In the next general election, in 1933, the Left was defeated by an alliance of right-wing parties, but they in turn narrowly lost to a popular front of socialists, communists, anarchists and centrists in February 1936.

The new government, correctly suspecting that the rightist Spanish military was preparing a coup d’etat, fired several army generals and transferred their rightist chief commander, General Francisco Franco, to the Canary Islands.

What happened next was closely observed by Winston Churchill, then a prominent member of the British House of Commons, who later became Britain’s Prime Minister. Here is how he described the start of the Spanish Civil War in *The Gathering Storm*, his history of the years between the two world wars:

“At the end of July, 1936, the increasing degeneration of the parliamentary regime in Spain, and the growing strength of... a Communist, or alternatively an Anarchist, revolution, led to a military revolt which had long been preparing... Side by side with the Communist conspiracy there was elaborated in secret a deep military counterplot. Neither side could claim with justice the title-deeds of legality...

“Many of the ordinary guarantees of civilized society had been already liquidated by the Communist perversion of the decayed Parliamentary government. Murders began on both sides... Already a large number of these assassinations had taken place in and around Madrid…When General Franco [who returned to Spain] raised the standard of revolt, he was supported by the Army, including the rank and file… [the Catholic] Church... and nearly all the elements of the Right and Center... and he became immediately the master of several important [Spanish] provinces.

“Bitter civil war now began. Wholesale cold-blooded massacres of their political opponents, and of the well-to-do, were perpetrated by the Communists... These were repaid with interest by the forces under Franco...”

The fighting between the so-called “loyalists” or “republicans” — who supported the Spanish government — and the Falangist “nationalists” — who were led by Franco — alarmed the British and French governments, who feared the strife9 could start a bigger war. They proposed an agreement under which 27 nations pledged to not interfere in the Spanish conflict.

Whereupon two of the signatories — Adolf Hitler, the *Führer* of Nazi Germany, and Joseph Stalin, the dictator of the Communist Soviet Union — promptly violated their commitment by providing the warring armies with vital manpower and weapons.

As a result, he was on course to victory. Franco and his 35,000 troops from Africa poured in the summer of 1936 into the Spanish mainland. Thanks to the support from “nationalist” generals and politicians, he quickly took control of about one-half of the territorial army of 60,000 men, as well as almost one half of Spain's territory and its population of 25 million.

Moreover, he was receiving help from several rightist governments, above all Nazi Germany, which was the military superpower in Europe. Hitler sent to Franco 16,000 troops, 200 tanks, 600 aircraft, and an elite *Luftwaffe* unit called the Condor Legion, whose main mission was to test Germany’s latest war planes. By the end of the war, the Nazi troops had trained an estimated 56,000 nationalists.

In addition, Hitler persuaded Italy’s fascist dictator Benito Mussolini to also enter the war, which he did on a grand scale. He provided Franco with 50,000 soldiers and 240,000 rifles, 10,000 machine guns, 800 artillery pieces, 660 planes, and 150 tanks.

By contrast, what was left of the loyalist military forces after wholesale desertions to Franco was a pauper. The Republican Army had only one-half of the rifles and about a third of the machine guns and artillery pieces it needed; it had only 18 modern tanks (and the nationalists seized 10 of them); and the Republican Navy — just like the Army — lost many officers to Franco. The Republican Air Force was badly outdated.

As for the Soviet aid to the loyalists, it was comparatively modest. It included no more than 3,000 soldiers and up to 806 planes, 362 tanks, and 1,895 artillery pieces, and had to be paid for in cash.

Moscow was much more generous in sending to Spain its secret service agents who antagonized many Communist sympathizers (including the American writer Ernest Hemingway) by brazenly assassinating Spaniards who supported the Madrid government. The most important Soviet aid for the loyalists was an order to Communist Parties abroad to organize so-called International Brigades to fight alongside the loyalists.

By the end of the war, about 40,000 of these volunteers from 53 counties — including more than 1,000 Americans in the so-called “Abraham Lincoln Brigade” — were on the Spanish front lines. They fought bravely, but were mostly poorly trained and armed.

**FRANCO’S CONQUEST OF SPAIN**

As Franco’s legions disembarked in the summer of 1936 at the Seville port and advanced north and west, they unleashed a savage campaign of rape and murder to bring the loyalists quickly to their knees. The toll of this so-called “White Terror” has been estimated at up to 400,000 loyalist troops and civilians, but it merely evoked a similarly inhuman but much smaller “Red Terror” that claimed about 38,000 victims.

By the end of September, the invaders seized Alcazár, a republican stronghold south of Madrid, and in October, they launched a major assault on the Spanish capital. In what was hailed as a major loyalist triumph in the war, the republican troops and the newly arrived International Brigades made good on their battle cry “*No Pasarán*” — “*They Will Not Pass!*” and repulsed the falangists in fierce fighting.

For the next two years, Franco’s forces, reinforced by the Italian contingents, made several attempts to conquer Madrid, but the defenses of the city held firm almost the entire period. In one of their attempts to encircle the capital, in the battle of Guadalajara, the falangists were defeated so soundly they even yielded to the republicans some territory.

But in general, the German and Italian reinforcements enabled Franco to stay on the offensive. In April, 1937, the pilots of Goering’s Condor Legion made history by conducting the world’s first to bombing raid on a non-military target — the village of Guernica — and killing some 200-300 civilians. The outrageous act of terrorism shocked the world’s opinion and inspired Picasso’s heart-rending mural, but it convincingly demonstrated the Falangists’ air superiority.

In March 1938, Franco and his German and Italian allies launched a major offensive that cut the loyalist-held part of Spain in two. Aware of the approaching defeat, the Madrid government tried to sue for peace, but Franco demanded an unconditional surrender.

Four months later the morale of the increasingly hard-pressed republicans received another major blow when Britain, France, and Italy acknowledged Hitler’s preeminence in Europe by accepting his *diktat*10 at Munich that deprived Czechoslovakia of its borderland defenses. The Nazi triumph was followed by Franco’s massive invasion of the province of Catalonia and the capture of Barcelona, its major city. In March of the following year, a nationalist offensive seized in two days Madrid, and the last loyalist forces surrendered on April 1.

Postwar research has established that both Hitler and Stalin kept prolonging the Spanish Civil War — which had caused 500,000 deaths — for complex political and military reasons. The new evidence from Berlin’s and Moscow’s archives upheld Churchill’s conclusion that only one group of the participants in the conflict deserved to be admired.

“All Spaniards,” he noted in *The Gathering Storm*, “went to their deaths with remarkable composure.”