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THE BRITISH BATTALION OF THE INTERNATIONAL BRIGADES AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR, 1936-39

DR MATTHEW HUGHES

*In 1995 the film *Land and Freedom* brought the Spanish Civil War to life on screen while offering a view of the war as being a popular revolution crushed by unfettered Stalinism in the form of a regular Republican army. However, Dr Hughes here argues that the lack of unity and discipline within the Republican camp was just as much to blame for Franco's victory as the strength of Franco's forces. In fact, Franco took advantage of the lack of organisation in the Republican ranks and experienced little difficulty in outflanking the militia units defending the road to Madrid. Dr Hughes challenges the view that badly-disciplined, poorly-equipped, ill-led popular militias stood any chance against Franco's Moroccan-regulars and Spanish Foreign Legion. The British Battalion and the other foreign supporters for the Republican cause performed prodigious feats of bravery in these trying conditions, and the International Brigades as a whole were a great help to the Republic. But this was not enough since the Republic was disjointed and unable to pull together at the critical moments.*



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Ken Loach's 1995 film *Land and Freedom* broke new ground in bringing the Spanish Civil War on to the screen. It also gives a very particular view of the conflict in Spain from 1936-39. The film follows closely George Orwell's experiences in Spain in the Republican militia of the *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* (POUM—United Marxist Workers' Party) as outlined in his *Homage to Catalonia* (1938).¹ At the film's end there is a memorable scene where well-disciplined, smartly-uniformed Communist troops brutally disarm the populist militia force. The militia members plead with the faceless New Model Army of the Spanish Republic but to no avail. Loach offers the vision of a popular revolution crushed by unfettered Stalinism in the form of a regular Republican army. The 'regular' forces only appear on the screen to bully hapless militia members. Loach prefers to focus on the personal experiences of an English working-class man, David Carr, in the POUM militia on the quiet, peripheral Aragon front. Reviews of Loach's film, both by historians and ex-Brigaders, make this point, although with different degrees of vigour.² Paul Preston encapsulated the feelings of many Republican veterans who felt 'diminished by the political and personal self-indulgence on the Aragon front of the attractive boys and girls of the POUM'.³

Reality behind the vision

The reality was that groups like the POUM obstructed Republican victory. General Franco stifled Nationalist opposition in his zone from groups such as the Carlists and the Falange to present a solid front. By contrast, the Republic failed to use its considerable resources to full effect. POUM-type units were part of the problem. The time that the Republic took to establish itself allowed Franco the breathing space to organise his forces. Franco's martial background, coupled with the failure to capture Madrid in 1936, made him realise the significance of regular forces in what would be a drawn-out war of attrition. James Albrighton, a 19 year old British volunteer in the *Muerte es Maestro Centuria*, summed up the difference between the two sides when he noted in his diary how Anarchist militiamen told to carry out an order 'refused and instead of being sent to the guard house (now I come to think of it, we have no guard room) . . . held a discussion, and in the end voted to see if they should obey the cabo [corporal]'.⁴ One Catalan Anarchist militiaman, who subsequently served in the French Foreign Legion

and the British Army, admitted that his unit would have done better considering what he learnt during the Second World War.⁵ William Alexander, one of the commanders of the British battalion, wrote in 1937 to his sister how in Catalonia, where anarchism was strongest: 'When the anarchists start doing things—and by that I mean fighting—they will . . . realise the need for unity of command, discipline and effort'.⁶ The worry of being in the line next to an Anarchist unit was remarked on by one veteran of the war: 'Nobody in Madrid felt easy with an anarchist formation on his flank'.⁷ Technical branches of the Republican forces such as the navy were particularly badly served by radicalism. Sailors' Soviets kept run-down ships languishing in port and a superior Republican navy contributed little to the war effort.⁸ Many in the Republican zone, including the middle classes and army officers accustomed to discipline, looked to the Communists to present a tough, united exterior. LEO Charlton, a former British air attaché in America, summarised the problems inherent in the untrained militia system in a report which looked at the situation in 1936: 'The Militia

which attempted to stem the rebel onrush in the plains of Toledo, and in Estremadura, was not a disciplined army. Lacking officers, and without training, they comported themselves with heroism, it is true, but a spirit of individualism permeated their ranks which does not count for very much in a modern army.⁹ Tom Wintringham, one of the British Battalion commanders, in his account of the war, *English Captain*, again pointed to fundamental inadequacies in the militia where they failed to zigzag their trenches to prevent fire being directed down the length of the trench.¹⁰ As a result of this lack of basic field craft Nationalist planes easily routed militia columns by strafing these simple trenches from the air. Franco's 'Army of Africa' had little difficulty outflanking and routing the militia units defending the road to Madrid. This was the context of the emotionally charged scene of uniformed, conscript soldiers disarming the idealistic POUM volunteers in Loach's film.

The Soviet Union had her set of priorities in Spain and the evolution of a conventional Republican army was used by the Soviets as a means to usurp power. The Republic was faced with something of a Hobson's choice: either leave the militia system intact and lose the war, or build a Soviet-trained army that might win the war but could be used for control afterwards. Burnett Bolloten's argument that by May 1937 the Soviet-dominated Communists controlled Republican Spain is convincing.¹¹ Franco always claimed he was fighting international communism; assuming Bolloten's detailed argument to be correct, Franco was fighting a democracy in July 1936, but by late 1937 he was indeed confronted by the Comintern. For this reason, when it was first published in 1961, the undemocratic and censorious Francoist régime, not usually known for its promotion of foreign books, seized upon and advanced Bolloten's work.

The International Brigades as 'shock troops'

This article is not primarily concerned with the political machinations of the Spanish Civil War. Rather, it seeks to challenge the view portrayed in *Land and Freedom* that badly-disciplined, poorly-equipped,

ill-led popular militias stood any chance of success against Franco's Moroccan regulars and Spanish Foreign Legion (or *Tercio*) troops.¹² If the Republic were to defeat the Nationalist rebels, did they need the discipline of a modern army? Leon Trotsky's organisation of the Red Army in the Russian Civil War, 1918-22, with Tsarist officers re-employed and old-style discipline

After over two years' fighting in Spain the International Brigades were withdrawn in November 1938 in a 'last desperate effort' by the Republic to gain international goodwill and force Franco to expel his Italian and German forces.

re-imposed provides a historical parallel. The irony is that the POUM was portrayed by its opponents as a Trotskyist front organisation.

The International Brigades provide an exemplar of the change that occurred in the Republic from 1936 as it attempted to form a conventional army. Foreign volunteers eager to fight fascism arrived in Spain soon after the military uprising in July 1936. By October 1936 there were sufficient numbers in the Republican zone to form International Brigades, whose battalions, or 'legions of babel', were based loosely around common language.¹³ By late 1936 there was a British company, by January 1937 there were sufficient English-speaking soldiers to form a British battalion. Figures for the International Brigades vary according to the author's political standpoint, but 35-40 000 Brigaders as a

total for the whole war is broadly accurate.¹⁴ Nationalist claims of 125 000 'red hooligans' with the Republic should be ignored.¹⁵ No more than 20 000 volunteers served in the International Brigade at any one time.¹⁶ That the Republican forces by April 1937 exceeded 350 000 in total puts the International Brigades' contribution in proportion: a maximum of eight brigades in the Republican Army were primarily international.¹⁷ By September 1938 there were only 12 000 volunteers left in Spain and the Brigades had been leavened with Spanish conscripts. In total, 10 000 Brigaders died in Spain.¹⁸

The Brigades were used as defensive and offensive 'shock' troops at critical moments in the fighting. Until the Republic organised and trained regular mixed brigades (with four infantry battalions), the International Brigades were among their best troops. POUM-type units were garrisoned on inactive sectors of the front while the International Brigades acted as the Republic's mobile reserve, moving between emergencies. After over two years' fighting in Spain the International Brigades were withdrawn in November 1938 in a 'last desperate effort' by the Republic to gain international goodwill and force Franco to expel his Italian and German forces.¹⁹ In this the Republic failed, the nonsense of non-intervention meant that in 1939 Franco emerged triumphant and Franco's German ally took its lessons from the Spanish cockpit into the Second World War. It is not apparent what Benito Mussolini learnt from the poor showing of his army fighting for Franco as it collapsed at battles like Guadalajara in March 1937.²⁰ Perhaps Mussolini, like the Austro-Hungarian Field Marshal of the First World War Conrad von Hötzendorf, deserved a better army: one capable of defeating opponents more substantial than Abyssinian tribesmen. He never got it. Then again, perhaps his army deserved a better leader. They never got one.

The British battalion

Britain sent some 2500 volunteers to Spain, most of whom fought in the British battalion, 1200 were wounded and 526 were killed: 'an extraordinarily high proportion', and

one reflecting the intensity of the battles in which the British were involved.²¹ The British fought as a unit in four key actions of the war: the battles of Jarama (February 1937), Brunete (July 1937), Teruel (January-February 1938) and Ebro (July-August 1938). This article will examine the development of the International Brigades with particular emphasis on the British battalion in the overall context of a changing Republican Army. Stress will be placed on the evolution of a 'conventional' army as a necessary means of defeating the Nationalists.

British volunteers arriving in Spain were a mixed group of Communists and non-Communists. The Communist Party organised the journey to Spain for party members; others made their own way to the border, including Winston Churchill's nephew, Esmond Romilly, who described his experiences in Spain in *Boadilla* (1937), and the author Laurie Lee whose adventures in Spain are colourfully outlined in *A Moment of War* (1991). There were undoubtedly some *dilettantes* and rogues among those who bought their tickets for a 'weekend' in Paris, but the idea that unemployed men from the Embankment in London were press-ganged into going to Spain has never been proved: 'I left a good comfortable home to come out here . . . we were not compelled to fight, but on the contrary, are eager to get to grips with the fascists. The best friend I have here is my machine gun, and the more fascists it kills the more I love it.'²² C Day Lewis's inscription on the Brigades' London memorial that 'They went because their open eyes could see no other way', reflected the personal decision made by Brigaders. The British Government obstructed the passage of volunteers as part of its disinterested policy to the war in Spain. The Foreign Office sent invoices to all the men taken prisoner by the Nationalists during the war for the cost of their subsequent repatriation; Special Branch officers at Newhaven did their best to stop men getting across the Channel.

The British battalion was comprised of men who had made the decision to go to Spain. They were motivated and this was to give them considerable *élan* in battle. By contrast, Italians fighting for Franco and taken prisoner at Guadalajara told

their captors that they had been otherwise unemployed in Italy and 'had no idea where they were going until they arrived in Spain.'²³ One British party member explained his decision to go to Spain with the lines: 'My short period of University life was useful. But in a world of wars and revolutions new tasks are on the agenda: Let us see that they are carried out.'²⁴ This idealism was not

. . . the idea that unemployed men from the Embankment in London were press-ganged into going to Spain has never been proved . . .

atypical and reflected a genuine feeling of revulsion at fascism among volunteers for the International Brigades.

Volunteers from countries such as France and Germany had experience of peacetime conscription besides ideological fervour. Among the British, however, some had fought in the First World War, some had trained in the OTC (Officers' Training Corps), or had served in the regular British Forces or Territorials. 'Many of our men had experience in the last war and others came from countries where they had military training' remembered the British volunteer John Johnstone.²⁵ Richard Bennett went out to Spain with the poet John Cornford, and wrote how as an ex-OTC member he was the 'military expert' of his group as he was a good shot and could 'demonstrate the use of the Mills hand grenades and the Lewis machine gun'.²⁶ There were Irishmen such as Frank Ryan, who had fought with the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and British volunteers such as George Nathan, who had been a Jewish officer in the Brigade of Guards, and who had been attached to the 'Black and Tans' during the Irish War of Independence.²⁷ Nathan was said to have taken part, as a member of the

'Dublin Castle Murder Gang', in the assassination of the Mayor and ex-Mayor of Limerick.²⁸ Common cause was to unite an otherwise disparate group of individuals.

The battle of Jarama in February 1937 was the British battalion's baptism of fire. The Nationalists attacked south of Madrid to cut the Madrid-Valencia highway and encircle the capital. The British, as part of the 15th International Brigade, were sent, along with regular Republican units, to hold the line. Peter Kemp, one of the few from Britain who fought with Franco, was highly impressed by the British performance at Jarama.²⁹ The British battalion fought 'very well indeed' and writing from the opposing side Kemp remembered how bitter the Nationalists were of the International Brigades for prolonging the war.³⁰ Frank Thomas, in Franco's Spanish Foreign Legion and at Jarama, recalled how the British Brigaders presented his unit with more 'solid opposition' than he was accustomed to: 'One night in particular they made a bayonet charge against us at dusk . . . momentarily the Bandera [battalion] gave way'.³¹ Morale and motivation in the International Brigades in these early battles were vital.

The lack of training and equipment

The British battalion had been hastily put together for Jarama, and so by the end of 12 February, of an original complement of 600, only 225 were left in the line. This haste was not the only reason for the heavy casualties suffered by the British battalion at Jarama. The losses reflected their lack of training and the generally inchoate state of the Republican Army. Recruits were lucky to have fired three to five rounds of live ammunition on the firing ranges before going into battle: 'without weapons [.] training at Madrigueras [the British base near Albacete] was rudimentary; a route march each day to harden us. Then cases of guns arrived . . . we were dismayed at their age—made in Steyr, Austria, and date stamped 1886! There was no ammunition so we couldn't practise firing.'³² The issue of modern Soviet rifles to the British before Jarama to replace the dated rifles provided some compensation, but training was still rudimentary and Soviet supplies

erratic.³³ The British were not unique in that 75 per cent of them had 'never held a loaded weapon in their hands before' going in to battle at Jarama.³⁴ One recruit who had served in the British Army got a 'good laugh out of the training', adding that most men learnt on the battlefield.³⁵ In 1988 John Henderson remembered that he fired ten rounds on the practice range and 'that was the sum total of the military experience of just about everybody'. The news came through about the Nationalist breakthrough at Jarama and 'then we were in the lorries and up in the line.'³⁶ A Spanish recruit who posed a question about bomb trajectories during a training lecture given by Fred Copeman, the British battalion commander (and ex-seaman dismissed the Royal Navy for involvement in the Invergordon mutiny in 1931), was told in reply: 'I don't know mate, I'm a sailor myself.'³⁷ Copeman, who had also been a boxing champion, settled disagreements over discipline at Jarama in unorthodox fashion, 'by hitting out at his opponent.'³⁸ Training did undoubtedly improve, but as late as 1938 a British recruit was still complaining that 'he wasn't a trained soldier' and that he learnt soldiering 'by actually doing it in action.'³⁹

From the above it is hardly surprising that the British battalion was unsatisfactory when it came to imitating a conventional army. There was the recurring problem of soldiers not receiving and even ignoring orders. This made command and control in battle erratic. Jim Brewer, in the British anti-tank battery, was present at an incident where they refused to withdraw their Soviet-supplied 37mm anti-tank gun, arguing that they were not in any real danger. Malcolm Dunbar, the battery commander, sent Frank Proctor of the battery headquarters to the recalcitrant gun armed with a pistol. Proctor was forced to threaten the battery crew: 'If you don't give your word that you will withdraw at once, I am commanded to shoot you. I was trained in the Royal Artillery and I will bloody well carry out that order.' As Brewer recalled: 'Frank was very convincing and we gave in'.⁴⁰

Lessons from history missed

At Jarama difficulties also arose because of the disjointed structure of

the Republican forces. German Brigaders doubted if the Republican high command had read any 'text-books on warfare published since the end of the Crimean War.'⁴¹ The Germans might have been right considering the Spanish experience of modern war. One Brigade veteran felt that the anachronistic Spanish attitude was because the 'twentieth-century Spaniard had grown up with a vision of war which seemed to be

The correspondence of the British Brigaders conveys how the volunteers felt that they were on a mission to halt the evils of fascism.

derived from the Medieval epic of the Cid and the contemporary bullfight; war was a sort of *corrida* which separated the *machos* from the cowards.⁴² In 1898 Spain had been rapidly defeated in the Spanish-American War and consequently lost what little remained of her American and Pacific empire. The Spanish then tried to build another empire, on a smaller scale, in northern Morocco, only to have the Rifians rout them in 1921 at the battle of Annul. The war in Morocco highlighted all that was wrong with the effete Spanish Army: corruption and inefficiency dogged the army's attempt to claw back the ground lost to the Rifians; only French intervention in 1925 made possible the defeat of Abd-el-Krim's Rifs and the creation of a Spanish Morocco.⁴³ The Moroccan War did, however, lead to the formation of the Spanish Foreign Legion which Franco commanded in the 1920s. Conquest in Morocco also allowed the recruitment of poverty-stricken tribesmen into the Spanish Army as *Regulares*. These Moroccans, along with the Legion, were Spain's most experienced troops and would form the nucleus of Franco's force until he could equip and train a new army.⁴⁴

Franco represented the Catholic and ultra-conservative trend in Spain and so his use of 'Moors' for his *reconquista* was incongruous. Both sides were willing to use what outside assistance was available. As with the International Brigades, Franco's Moroccan troops were badly mauled as they were used up in the first months of bitter fighting.

Jarama highlighted the basic deficiencies in the forces that remained loyal to the Republic. Much needed to be done if the Republic were to go on to the offensive to win the war. For instance, support on the flanks, crucial to prevent infiltration, disappeared as units left the field on their own initiative. Soldiers were left to fight individual unsupported actions. This had been a difficulty on the Cordoba front in 1936 when units that had successfully advanced then withdrew as they were left exposed by the inaction of the neighbouring formations.⁴⁵ The fierce resistance of the British at Jarama fortunately 'prevented the enemy discovering that the front was completely open on the left, without Republican troops at all.'⁴⁶ As Alexander noted in his chapter on Jarama:

'The [British] Battalion was surrounded on three sides, open to heavy fire from rifles, machine-guns and artillery, and to infiltration. Then without orders Overton withdrew his company to the 'Sunken Road', leaving Fry's No. 2 Machine-Gun Company without support or flank protection.'⁴⁷

The confusion of battle was compounded by language and translation difficulties. The diverse languages used 'posed a serious problem, especially when orders had to be translated several times during the thick of the fighting.'⁴⁸

Three factors emerge from the battle of Jarama that explain the Nationalists' defeat and throw light on a changing Republican Army: firstly, the high morale among the volunteers of the International Brigades; secondly, Nationalist exhaustion and a general overestimation of Franco's strength; finally, the evolution of a modern army in the Republican zone.

Experiences from the front

The resolve of the British unit allowed Brigaders to hold on in

trying circumstances. High morale plus a modicum of military training saved the day. The battalion's *esprit de corps* was a product of its members' conviction that what they were doing was right. This sense of having a real purpose explains how the Brigaders could resist Franco's Moroccan veterans. The correspondence of the British Brigaders conveys how the volunteers felt that they were on a mission to halt the evils of fascism. William Gilmour, out in Spain with the International Brigade, appears to be an unassuming volunteer to judge by his photograph.⁴⁹ His letters home, however, belie his pacific appearance and provide a good example of the determined mood of the volunteers: 'We have by now learned to grin and bear our disappointments [sic], with the assistance of our hatred for Fascism, it is not hard to do.'⁵⁰ Gilmour's mis-sives have the tone of propaganda pamphlets: 'I have grown to hate war in all its gruesome ghastliness but that hatred of war is much superseded by my hatred of fascism.'⁵¹ When Gilmour is granted three days' leave in Madrid his ardour does not wane: 'It has been a great tonic to my anti-fascism and by the time I returned to the trenches my hatred for Fascism has grown a hundred times greater.'⁵² While it is true that soldiers on leave in Madrid did go in for more prosaic pursuits, Gilmour captures something of the spirit of Spain.

Gilmour was not an isolated example. Another Brigader wrote home: 'Well? I ask you! Can we let all this go to Franco and his backers in order that it be used to beat down the working classes of all Europe . . . The Spanish people say NO! Only over their dead bodies'.⁵³ The political element to life in the lines was pronounced: 'The atmosphere was very political, even without all the letters and discussions the lads were all political.'⁵⁴ John Peet, who had served in the Grenadier Guards before Spain, and who later edited a pro-East German journal in the GDR, wrote to his mother about his decision to go to Spain with the lines: 'I am not returning to Prague, but going to Spain, to do what I think is the right thing. I know you and father do not agree with me on this, but I regard the fight in Spain as vital for the whole future of civilisation.'⁵⁵ For Edwin Greening, out in

Spain to fight the enemy, 'it was all political.'⁵⁶ The volunteer status and political motivation of the British volunteers went a long way to overcoming other shortcomings. There is no reason to suppose that the British battalion was unique: larger contingents from countries such as France and Germany were also in Spain with a purpose. Later in the war the influx of young Spanish Republican conscripts 'meant a very noticeable

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decline in enthusiasm and morale generally.'⁵⁷

The British battalion was also fortunate in that within its ranks exceptional leaders emerged. This leadership was to prove vital. Copeman, the ex-sailor, rallied what remained of the British battalion at Jarama, and Albrighton noted in his diary that under a 'less able man' the Moroccans would have broken through their lines. Copeman made his men hold their fire until the last moment and the 'result was devastating, the Moors fell by their hundreds and the remainder broke ranks and fled.'⁵⁸ A disillusioned Brigader who supplied an account of his experiences for a pro-Franco pamphlet still praised Nathan's leadership in battle.⁵⁹ Brewer, of the anti-tank battery, was struck by this process of natural selection: Copeman and Nathan were 'outstanding . . . These chaps were born leaders', Dunbar was 'superb . . . by any standards an exceptional soldier', while Sam Wild was a 'born commander'.⁶⁰

It was also the case that the

Nationalist forces' capabilities and strength were inflated. The presence of German and Italian troops with the Nationalists rather exaggerates the readiness and efficiency of Franco's forces. In fact, Franco's conscript army was invariably run-down and not much better equipped than its opponents. German units like the Condor Legion were the exception. The reality of life in the Nationalist lines is described by George Orwell in a section of *Homage to Catalonia*. Orwell had been part of an attack that had captured a Nationalist strong point and describing the Nationalist positions Orwell summed up the suffering and reality of the conflict for both sides: 'It was impossible not to be struck by the bare misery of the Fascist dug-outs. The litter of spare clothes, books, food, petty personal belongings that you saw in our own dug-outs was completely absent; these poor unpaid conscripts seemed to own nothing except blankets and a few soggy hunks of bread.'⁶¹ Attacking in the summer of 1938 at the Ebro, one British volunteer approaching the town of Gandesa came across abandoned Nationalist camps, and his memory of the plight of the Nationalist troops supports Orwell's view: 'I was very forcibly struck by the similarity of the field conditions of the two opposing forces. Franco's soldiers too had been camping out, obviously for a considerable period, without any proper shelter . . . the prisoners we saw were probably more uniformly attired than we were, but looked just as ragged and lousy.'⁶² Thomas, serving in Franco's Foreign Legion, received little training and the *Tercio* was Franco's best unit. Thomas joined the 6th Bandera after 'undergoing rapid and rudimentary training.'⁶³ In Eoin O'Duffy's Irish volunteer unit with Franco, rifles were also of a poor quality until, as with the International Brigades, decent rifles arrived, in this case from Germany.⁶⁴ Seamus Mackee, also with O'Duffy's Blueshirt unit, was kitted out in a shabby uniform when he went to Spain to fight for Franco: 'A more ill-equipped, slovenly gang it would be hard to imagine.'⁶⁵ The food supply in the Nationalist zone was poor and, like the International Brigade, rifles were outdated and live firing practice rare. The experience of Irishmen out in Spain fighting for Franco echoed that of the Brigaders: 'I saw men

trained for five days and given guns. They didn't even know which end of the rifle was which'.⁶⁶

Prolonging the war

High morale in the International Brigades, plus a more realistic assessment of Nationalist capabilities, goes some way to explaining the success of the Republican forces during the war. Soviet involvement, and the consequent development of a conventional army, completes the picture. As Hugh Thomas noted, this Soviet commitment, even in the early battles like Jarama, was crucial:

'It is easy to dwell on the exploits of the members of the International Brigades in this and other battles since their achievements are amply chronicled, since many men were courageous and since the fact of their presence was so unusual. But militarily more important at the Jarama were the Russian aircraft and tanks, which held the ground and controlled the air. Russian direction of the republican artillery was also important.'⁶⁷

A Swiss volunteer remembered that Soviet involvement permeated through the Republican forces: '*A chaque brigade et à chaque division a été adjoint un Russe avec le grade de conseiller militaire . . . Il y avait en outre des Russes dans toutes les armes spéciales, l'aviation, les tanks, les armes de défense anti-tanks etc.*'⁶⁸

The problem for the Republic was that while they developed something of a modern army capable of taking the offensive, as it would do at Brunete, Teruel and Ebro, their army was unable to turn local breakthroughs into strategic success. The war became a *guerre d'usure* which Franco, with his superior supply train from the Axis powers, would eventually win assuming Britain and France remained uncommitted. The attritional nature of the Spanish war, coupled to the poor state of the armies involved, made a rapid and decisive outcome unlikely. Each side had sufficient strength to prevent a breakthrough, yet each side was not strong enough to deal the knockout blow. As a consequence the war dragged on for three years.

After Jarama the attritional nature of the Spanish war became apparent. In March 1937 Franco resumed his attempt to take Madrid by encirclement. This resulted in the

battle of Guadalajara north-east of the capital. At Guadalajara Italian troops with the Nationalists spearheaded an attack that had some initial success. The offensive, however, was blunted and turned back, again the Republic emerged victorious in a defensive engagement. The British battalion did not take part in this action, but the improved quality of the Republican forces was evident,

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and other International Brigade units were involved in defeating the Italians:

'Officers and men of four brigades, three Spanish, one International, involved in the capture of Brihuega [at Guadalajara] had obeyed orders, operated coherently, and shown professional knowledge of tactics down to platoon and section level. They were an army and not autonomously minded collections of anarchist, communist or socialist militia.'⁶⁹

But when the first real Republican offensive of the war began at Brunete in July 1937 the attack was contained by the Nationalists. The battle of Brunete ground to a halt, as had the previous Nationalist offensives, and only a small penetration was realised. Like the Western Front during the Great War, both sides in Spain had trouble exploiting local

successes. A relatively primitive military structure and exiguous *matériel* in the Republican zone obviated against deep pushes into the Nationalist zone.

Improvement in the Republican troops

There were undoubtedly improvements in the Republican forces. Peet, for example, who had served in the British Army, commented on the improved discipline after Brunete: 'The contrast between this army and the British Army is astonishing. The officers are real comrades of the men and although discipline . . . is not as good as it should be, people who have been out here a long time say that things have improved collosally [sic] in that respect.'⁷⁰ Again, with Soviet advisers war planning was also enhanced, but the execution of battles was still a haphazard business. In April 1937, a British Brigader wrote in his diary an extract that summarised the difference between expectation and reality when it came to battle in the Spanish Civil War:

'This was the theory—i.e. that the momentum of the attack should pass from the left flank right along the line. It could have been effective if carried out. Actually, artillery started on time: planes half hour late: two attacking battalions on left flank not even in their own trenches till 8.30-9.00. Tanks late. Did not go over top till 9.30 . . . Ammo supplies sent up strayed to wrong part of the sector . . . Absolutely no momentum or support now . . . there was none of that scientific accuracy and organisation.'⁷¹

The improved capabilities and professionalism of the Republican side were evident by early 1938 but only in comparison to the chaos of 1936. Soldiers were now being taught the basic drills necessary to fight a modern war. Nat Abramson, a British Brigader, commented on the training instilled in the International Brigades on the eve of the Ebro offensive:

'AVION has just come over. I am writing these lines lying very still with my head covered by my . . . coat. It blends very well with the surroundings. None of us are allowed to look up when they appear, nor must there be any movements; in fact, when

sitting around or resting we are well spread out and cover as much ground as to make any bombing not too dangerous or effective.⁷²

This care taken to disperse and conceal troops can be favourably compared to the militias' inability to carry through such measures. Preparing to cross the Ebro, John Peet, in Spain since 1937, recalled how 'Training tightened up considerably from the early weeks of July 1938 in preparation for the difficult operation of crossing the Ebro River.'⁷³

Improvements not enough

The International Brigades were heavily involved in the battle of the Ebro, and the inherent possibilities after the initial push into the Nationalist lines were obvious to British Brigaders: 'we had this vast stretch of country all to ourselves and if we had sufficient transport we could have gone on to Saragossa and really caused consternation . . . if we'd had mobility . . . we could have exploited it.'⁷⁴ A breakthrough was achieved at the Ebro in July 1938 following an impressive river crossing by the Republicans, but there was a failure of exploitation. Herein lies the problem. By the Ebro offensive, the Republic was losing the war of attrition: support from abroad was flagging; the International Brigades were filling up with young Spanish conscripts; the Republic's stock of war equipment was diminishing; the Republic was losing the psychological war. The problems for the Republic could not be solved at this late stage by improved training and planning for battle. War weariness had set in and in the austere Nationalist zone Franco had prepared his side for a long struggle.

The British battalion performed prodigious feats of bravery and the International Brigades as a whole were a great help to the Republic. However, these exertions came to nothing because the Republic was disjointed. No amount of improved training was going to alter the fact that Franco had a focused aim and used his army to achieve his objective. The British stood and fought at Jarama, and then took the war to the enemy at Brunete, Teruel and Ebro, but the creation of a tough, conventional army could not mask the more profound flaws within the Republican camp.

Defeated by internal strife

On a visit to Spain in the 1970s after Franco died, a British doctor, who as a medical student had gone to Spain to tend the Republican wounded, recalled the fractious nature of life behind the lines in the 1930s that was still apparent in the 1970s: 'The one depressing feature of the visit was evidence that the division among the political left which was so fatal during the civil war, had continued. One man excused himself from arranging an introduction because of political differences (presumably socialist-communist).'⁷⁵ The differences, conspicuous many years after the Spanish Civil War, had damned the Republic. The International Brigades failed because their efforts were consumed in an environment of recrimination. If, however, the Popular Front had been united in its aim to assert its mandate (with help from the democracies of Europe) the presence of the International Brigades could have been decisive. The Republican side spent too much time fighting internal enemies. The International Brigades improved immensely during the war, as did the Popular Army, but the problems for the Republic were more profound. The Republic was disunited and unable to pull together even when there was an obvious common enemy. In Spain the development of a conventional army was crucial as a first step to winning the war. It was, however, not enough, and a lack of unity was to seal the fate of the Republic.

In this context the idea that the POUM could have had their popular revolution with the Nationalist enemy so close must appeal to doctrinaire ideologues. The advance of Franco from Spanish Morocco needed to be countered before radical social change could be countenanced. The battles upon which the Spanish Civil War were decided were fought by the International Brigades and the regular Republican Army. At Jarama, Guadalajara, Brunete, Teruel and the Ebro these units battled it out with Franco's Nationalist forces. While Rome burnt, the militias in Catalonia, upon which Loach's *Land and Freedom* indulgently focused, were deciding the war in their own fashion, by talking, holding meetings and encouraging the peasants to have a revolution. □

Notes

1. For militia system, see George Orwell, 'Notes on the Spanish Militia' in *Collected Essays, Journalism & Essays*, (Penguin, 1971), vol. 1.
2. Hugh Thomas, *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 September 1995 and Bill Alexander, *The Morning Star*, 7 October 1995.
3. Paul Preston, 'Viva la revolucion', *New Statesman and Society*, 16 February 1996, p. 21.
4. International Brigade Memorial Archive (hereafter IBA), Marx Memorial Library London, Box 50/A1/12, Albrighton papers, diary, 15 October 1936.
5. Oral recording, Imperial War Museum (hereafter IWM), Jaime Mas Homs, 10627/5.
6. IBA/50/Alexander papers, Alexander to sister, 19 September 1937.
7. Bernard Knox, 'Remembering Madrid', *New York Review of Books*, 6 November 1980, p. 35.
8. IBA/5/4, 'The Naval Side of the War', W V Emanuel (n.d.). Also in Blodgett collection, W857, Queen Mary Westfield College, London (hereafter QMW).
9. Blodgett collection, QMW, LEO Charlton, 'The Military Situation in Spain', p. 9.
10. Tom Wintringham, *English Captain*, (London, Faber & Faber, 1939) p. 132.
11. Bolloten, *The Grand Camouflage: the Communist Conspiracy in the Spanish Civil War*, (London, Hollis & Carter, 1961). Revised in 1980 as *The Spanish Revolution: The Left and the Struggle for Power During the Civil War*.
12. For an Englishman who fought in Franco's Tercio see Peter Kemp, *Mine Were of Trouble*, (London, Cassell, 1957). Kemp's oral record held at the IWM (9769/3).
13. Hence the title of Verle Johnston's, *Legions of Babel: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War*, (Pennsylvania University Press, 1967).
14. Stanley Payne, *The Spanish Revolution*, (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), pp. 327-8.
15. M W Jackson, *The Army of Strangers: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War*, p. 105 in IBA/19/D/27.
16. Raymond Carr, *The Spanish Tragedy: The Civil War in Perspective*, (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1993), p. 144. Hugh Thomas' seminal, *The Spanish Civil War*, (London, Penguin, 1986) p. 982 gives 18 000 for total.
17. Payne, *Spanish Revolution*, pp. 327-31; Ken Bradley & Mike Chappell, *International Brigades in Spain, 1936-39*, (London, Osprey, 1994), p. 6.
18. Carr, *Spanish Tragedy*, p. 144.
19. Jill Edwards, *The British Government and the Spanish Civil War 1936-39*, (London, Macmillan, 1979), pp. 175-80.
20. See Brian R Sullivan, 'The Italian Soldier in Combat, June 1940-September

1943: Myths, Realities and Explanation' in Paul Eddison & Angus Calder (eds), *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West*, (London, Pimlico, 1997).

21. Quote oral recording IWM, lecture, Alisdair Hennessy on Spain, 13160/3. For statistics Colin Williams *et al*, *Memoirs of the Spanish Civil War*, (Stroud, Sutton 1996) p. x (also Thomas, *Civil War*, p. 983).

22. IBA/50/Gilmour papers, Gilmour to 'comrade' in Britain, 5 April 1937.

23. In Blodgett collection, QMW, W734, 'My Impressions of Spain', Duchess of Atholl, April/May 1937.

24. IBA/50/Guest papers, 'Reasons for my decision: A note found among Guest's papers, 1938.'

25. IBA/50/Johnstone papers, 'What is the International Brigade' n.d., p.2.

26. IBA/50/Bennett papers, letter, Bennett to J Fyrth, 12 December 1985.

27. For Ryan see IBA/28/G/3, 'Statement made re Frank Ryan, International Brigade by American comrade, prisoner with Ryan in Spain'; S Cronin, *Frank Ryan: The Search for the Republic*, (Dublin 1980).

28. See Richard Bennett, *New Statesman*, 24 March 1961, (also 31 March and 7 April).

29. For Irish volunteers with Franco see Robert Stradling, 'Franco's Irish Volun-

teers', *History Today*, Vol. 45(3), March 1995, pp. 40-47.

30. Kemp, IWM, 9769/3.

31. Rob Stradling, *Cardiff and the Spanish Civil War*, (Cardiff, Butetown Arts Centre, 1996), p. 97.

32. Quote IBA/50/Levine papers, 'Cheetham to Cordova', p. 33; *Ibid*, p. 34 & IBA/50/Thompson papers, 'Sojourn in Spain' [1985], p. 4 for live firing.

33. IBA/50/Levine papers, 'Cheetham', p. 40; also Bill Alexander, *British Volunteers for Liberty: Spain, 1936-39*, (London, Lawrence & Wishart 1986), pp. 76-77.

34. Thomas, *Civil War*, p. 592.

35. South Wales Miners' Library, University of Swansea (hereafter SWML), AUD/3: O'Donoghue.

36. IBA/A-12/Henderson papers, interview, 1988, p. 4.

37. IBA/50/Horne papers, autobiography, p. 43.

38. IBA/50/Levine papers, 'Cheetham', p. 41.

39. SWML, AUD/1: Greening; also Greening in AUD/15.

40. IBA/A-12/Brewer papers, letter, Brewer to Alexander, 3 December 1979.

41. IBA/50/A1/Albrighton papers, diary, 6 November 1936.

42. Knox, 'Remembering Madrid', p. 40.

43. For Rifs see David Woolman, *Rebels in the Rif: Abd-el-Krim and the Rif Rebel-*

lion, (London, OUP, 1969).

44. IWM(14736/1), George Joffé, 'Moroccan Participation in the Spanish Civil War'.

45. IBA/50/O'Riordan papers, 'Ireland and the anti-fascist struggle' n.d., p. 12.

46. Alexander, *Volunteers*, p. 97.

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48. Johnston, *Babel*, p. 60.

49. Plate, IBA BoxA-2: fileA/38.

50. IBA/50/Gilmour papers, letter to comrade, 5 May 1937.

51. *Ibid*.

52. *Ibid*, 14 May 1937.

53. IBA/A-12/Abramson papers, Abramson to Harry and Minnie, 27 March 1938, p. 2.

54. IBA/A-12/Kerr papers, interview [1988], p. 2.

55. IBA/A-12/Peet papers, Peet to mother, 'somewhere in France' n.d.

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57. IBA/A-12/Peet papers, File Pe/3, Notes on Spain entitled 'Nuts and Bolts of Spanish War'.

58. IBA/50/A1/12, Albrighton papers, diary, 20 February 1937.

59. Blodgett collection, QMW, W958, 'In Spain with the International Brigades. A Personal Narrative', pp. 44-45.

60. SWML, AUD/2: Brewer; also AUD/3: O'Donoghue on Copeman.

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42nd, 44th, 50th and 51st Divisions, and travelled with them to France to command III Corps. 48th Division trained separately, moving to France under command of I Corps.

14. Army Council meeting, 29 March 1940. Quoted in Drewienkiewicz, *op cit*, p. 43.

15. Caddick-Adams, *By God They Can Fight!*, 143rd Brigade, 1995, pp. 163-177.

16. Drewienkiewicz, *op cit*, p. 48.

17. War Diary of 48th (South Midland) Division (GS), for December 1939, PRO Ref. WO 166/578.

18. War Diary of 48th (South Midland) Division (GS), for March 1940, PRO Ref. WO 167/244.

19. Interview with ex-Pte Norman Fowler, 15/5/95.

20. Interviews with ex-Capt. Ron Jones, 27/1/95; ex-Cpl Colin Hughes, 9/8/94; ex-Ptes Jack Hall and Wilf Troughton & ex-Sgt. John Joyce, 6/9/94; ex-Pte Bill Buckingham, 12/4/97; Maj Dennis Dodd, 24/8/95.

21. For example, *Rustysforce*, *Polforce*, *Petreforce*, *Macforce* or *Frankforce*. See Chapter 2, by Brian Bond on Lord Gort, in John Keegan (ed), *Churchill's Generals*, (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1991).

22. Bartholomew Report, conclusions, July 1940, PRO Ref WO 106/1741.

23. In August 1919, Lloyd George's Cabinet imposed stringent limits on defence expenditure, and laid down that

future plans be based on the assumption that there would be no major war within ten years, and that no expeditionary forces would be needed. In the aftermath of a terrible war, with the German Army defeated and dismembered, and the Imperial Navy scuppered at Scapa Flow, this was not an unreasonable supposition to make. The ten-year rule was later extended on a daily basis, from 1928. That it remained Government policy until 1932, long after the war clouds had started to gather, implies a lack of realism that crept in along the way.

24. Bond, 'The Territorial Army in Peace and War', article in *History Today*, *op cit*, p. 164.

Continued from page 66

61. Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, (London, Penguin 1968), p. 92.

62. IBA/A-12/Peet papers, File Pe/3, 'Nuts and Bolts of Spanish War'.

63. Stradling, *Cardiff*, p. 95.

64. See Geraghty, IWM, 14893/3 for poor rifles. O'Duffy's support for Franco is described in his *Crusade in Spain*, (London, 1938).

65. Blodgett collection, QMW, W1011, Mackee, *I Was a Franco Soldier*, p. 17.

66. Blodgett collection, QMW, W1223, 'Deserter from Irish battalion [in Franco's army] tells of exploits as rebel deserter' n.d.

67. Thomas, *Civil War*, p. 593.

68. IBA/A-1/B/4, 'Révélation, par Ernest Zund, Membre d la Brigade internationale "Dimitrof" n.d.' Zund's account is discussed in 'The International Brigade' by 'Wayfarer' c.1939-40, Blodgett collection, QMW.

69. George Hills, *The Battle for Madrid*, (London, Vantage, 1976) p. 134.

70. IBA/A-12/Peet papers, Peet to

mother, 29 September 1937.

71. IBA/D-4/Crook papers, diary, April 1937, p. 53.

72. IBA/A-12/Abramson papers, Abramson to Harry and Minnie, 27 March 1938, p. 5.

73. IBA/A-12/Peet papers, 'Nuts and Bolts of Spanish War'.

74. SWML, AUD/2, Brewer.

75. A L Cochrane, 'Forty Years Back: A Retrospective Survey', *British Medical Journal*, 22-29 December 1979, p. 1663.

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