



Bulletin of Spanish Studies

Hispanic Studies and Researches on Spain, Portugal and Latin America

ISSN: 1475-3820 (Print) 1478-3428 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cbhs20>

Operation X: Soviet Russia and the Spanish Civil War

Daniel Kowalsky

To cite this article: Daniel Kowalsky (2014) Operation X: Soviet Russia and the Spanish Civil War, Bulletin of Spanish Studies, 91:1-2, 159-178, DOI: [10.1080/14753820.2013.868655](https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2013.868655)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2013.868655>



Published online: 24 Jan 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1214



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Operation X: Soviet Russia and the Spanish Civil War

DANIEL KOWALSKY

Queen's University Belfast

For several generations of historians, one of the last major unexplored topics in modern history was Soviet participation in the Spanish Civil War. Until recently, until the early years of this century, it was axiomatic that Soviet intervention in Spain would always be mired in controversy and mystery. We now have a reasonably deep understanding of this long enigmatic subject, and it is based on empirical evidence, and verified through multiple studies in several languages. This historiographical breakthrough has come as the result of the research and publications of a small group of intrepid scholars whose collective work permits us to speak with authority about Russian intervention, and to draw far-ranging conclusions that touch on many other areas of twentieth-century history. This essay will provide the reader with an impressionistic pastiche of that research, but will also single out sub-topics that require further work.

We will start not at the beginning, but before the beginning. Prior to the Civil War of 1936–1939, Spain had never loomed large in the Russian imagination. If, during the Romanov period, the Russian tsars had maintained diplomatic relations with the Spanish crown, these were rarely accompanied by normal economic or cultural exchanges. After the Russian Revolution, Spain withdrew its ambassador from St Petersburg, refusing all overtures from the new regime. Indeed, it was not until 1933 that Spain formally recognized the legality of the USSR.¹ In response to its poor reception on the Iberian Peninsula, the Soviet leadership delayed in establishing even a small Comintern presence in Spain, and in general proved themselves as uninterested in Spain as their tsarist forbears. In July 1936, the two countries had no diplomatic or commercial relations, and only limited cultural contact; Castilian was not taught in Soviet language institutes, and Spanish history and literature was barely studied. On the eve of the Civil War, Spain remained an unknown place to both the Russian people and Kremlin leadership. And the Spanish were equally ignorant of the

1 Daniel Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética y la Guerra Civil española: una revisión crítica* (Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 2003), 13–17.

Russian-speaking world. It says much that, in the mid 1930s, there was no Spanish-Russian, nor Russian-Spanish dictionary in print in either state, nor anywhere in the world. All of that would change after the rebel uprising of 18 July 1936. For the thirty-two months that followed, Russia would become deeply implicated in the Spanish imbroglio, more so than any other foreign power.

The Soviet regime was quick to respond to the outbreak of the Spanish war, even if it did not immediately appreciate the magnitude and likely duration of it. However unawares the officer rebellion in Spain initially caught the Soviet leadership, less than one week after the uprising the fate of the Republic was brought before the Politburo. This resulted in the 22 July decision, taken at the highest level, to sell discounted fuel to Madrid.² For the Republic's representatives in Paris, this concession, which had been refused elsewhere, was seen as an opening. Thus on 25 July 1936, the Madrid government appealed to the Soviet ambassador in Paris with the following telegram:

The government of the Spanish Republic needs to supply its army with a significant quantity of modern weapons to wage war on what began as and continues to be a civil war against the legal authority and constitutional government [...] As head of my government, and knowing the possibilities and availability of weapons at the disposal of the USSR, I decided to apply to you so that you would inform your government of our government's wish and necessity to seek a supply from your country of a great quantity of all categories of military supplies.³

Simultaneously, of course, Madrid was appealing to all non-fascist states for material assistance and other forms of support. But the Soviets did not respond immediately. Stalin may have agreed at this early stage to assist with fuel supplies, but military intervention was not yet on the table. Yet the following week, on 3 August 1936, the Soviet Union began to implement a policy in reaction to the events 3,500 kilometres away in Spain. From that date, and until the war's end on 1 April 1939, the Soviet position on Spain would not only be varied, encompassing numerous separate strands of involvement, but implemented piecemeal, in stages. Further, Soviet

2 Yuri Rybalkin, *Operatsiia 'X': Sovetskaia voennaia pomoshch' respublikanskoi Ispanii (1936–1939)* (Moscow: AIRO-XX, 2000), 37. To date, only Rybalkin has cited unpublished material for this discovery, accessed through his military connections at the Presidential Archive (f. 3, op. 74, del. 20, l, p. 51). The reference is cited without attribution in Anthony Beevor's popular history, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolas, 2006), 156 and, with attribution, in Ángel Viñas, *La soledad de la República* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2006), 86.

3 RGVA (Russian State Military Archive) f. 33987, op. 3, del. 960, l, p. 219. The same document may be consulted in the Archives of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, R-2296/7. All translations are by the author.

activities *vis-à-vis* the war would be contradictory, at times highly altruistic and at others cynical. Several generations of tendentious postwar scholars were hamstrung in their attempts to squeeze this unique episode in Soviet history into an ideological straightjacket. The story, as we will now see, was far too nuanced for that.

Russia's first stage of involvement in the Spanish war was directed not towards the Iberian Peninsula but at the captive audience back home in the USSR. Stalin did not approve military aid to the Republic until the middle of September 1936, nearly two months after the war began. Even before beginning its military intervention, the Soviet government had seized on the Nationalist uprising as an opportunity to rally domestic support for the Stalinist regime and for its policy of collective security, anti-fascism and the popular front strategy. It is striking how quickly Moscow acted to convert events on the distant Iberian Peninsula—a region with no discernible place in the popular Soviet consciousness of the mid 1930s—into a cause for which the populace was compelled to noisily demonstrate its support and make sizable individual contributions for humanitarian aid. The solidarity campaign was a highly coordinated effort, meticulously directed and sparing little expense. The most revealing declassified source comes from the 20 September 1936 twelve-point Politburo protocol, entitled, 'Conference on the Question of Developing a Campaign of Assistance to the Spanish People':

1. Hold meetings centring on events in Spain in Moscow on 21 September at the Stalin and Kaganovich automobile factories. The announcements concerning these meetings should be prepared by 4 pm; Comrade Tal will see to their submission today to the central newspapers.
2. Hold this sort of meeting in Leningrad, Kiev, Kharkov, Minsk, Tiflis, Gorkii, Saratov, Kuibyshev, Stalingrad, Sverdlovsk, Cheliabinsk, Novosibirsk, Baku, Kharabovsk, Vladivostok, Odessa, Dnepropetrovsk, Stalina, Rostov/Don, Ivanov and Boronezd.
3. Introduce a [humanitarian] deduction of $\frac{1}{4}$ of daily pay.
4. The Party's Central Committee (Comrade Shvernik) will organize an appeal to the central committees of the unions by placing an appeal in the union press, and in the case of some committees (railroads, cotton production) in the central press.
5. For the Komsomol (Comrade Kosarev):
 - a. Organize gatherings of youth [workers] at the aircraft factory No. 39, and the 'Serp and Molot' factory.
 - b. Publish appeals in *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*
 - c. Issue orders determining the location of organized meetings of youth, which will illuminate the Spanish events.
6. Comrades Angarov and Nikolaev are ordered to provide for the organization (in Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev) of benefit concerts

- for Spanish women and children. Each concert will commence with solemn and brief speeches on the Spanish events.
7. Comrade Tal is ordered to provide in the coming days for wider coverage in the central and regional press of the campaign of solidarity and assistance of workers of the USSR with the workers of Spain. The newspapers *Pravda*, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, *Trud*, as well as regional and local newspapers, must devote more space to this material in the coming days.
 8. At meetings, the question of the Spanish events should be covered in greater depth. Comrades Tal and Knorin are ordered to ensure that material for speakers and propagandists concerning the Spanish events is published three times daily.
 9. Comrades Tal and Knorin are ordered to develop by 22 September slogans (for the press, speakers and clubs) related to the Spanish events.
 10. Arrange for the publication on 21 September in newspapers (through TASS) the amount of funds that has been collected to aid Spanish women and children. Hereafter, systematically publish the new receipts of these funds. This project will be charged to Comrade Shvernik.
 11. Comrade Tal is ordered to ensure that on 22 September the leading story in *Pravda*, *Izvestiia*, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, and *Trud* will illuminate the aid to the Spanish people and their struggle against the rebels.
 12. Comrade Angarov is ordered to provide for more saturated radio transmissions of material illuminating the Spanish events and information regarding the response to these events in the interior of the country.⁴

This decree added momentum to events initiated on 3 August, when large numbers of workers in cities across the USSR began demonstrating in favour of the Republic. According to the Soviet press coverage, and confirmed by some foreign observers, these rallies attracted crowds of workers ranging from 10,000 in Tbilisi and 30,000 in Minsk, to 100,000 in Leningrad and 120,000 in Moscow.⁵

Closely linked to the domestic campaign was the decision taken by the Politburo at the same time to send *Pravda* correspondent Mikhail Koltsov to begin covering the war directly from the Republican zone. Koltsov was

4 RGASPI (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii) [Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History] (formerly Rossiiskii Tsentr Khraneniia i Izucheniia Dokumentov Noveishei Istorii, or RTsKhIDNI), f. 17, op. 120, del. 274, ll, pp. 1–2.

5 On the domestic campaigns, see Academy of Sciences of the USSR, *International Solidarity with the Spanish Republic, 1936–1939* (Moscow: Progreso, 1974) and Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética*, 73–95.

quickly followed by two additional Soviet print journalists: Ilya Ehrenberg of *Izvestiia* and Ovadii Savich, the TASS correspondent.⁶ It was the task of the journalists to provide content and copy for the increasing amount of coverage of Spain afforded in the Soviet national press. The implementation of Politburo decrees on saturation press coverage had immediate results; following the decision of 20 September 1936, column space in *Izvestiia* devoted to Spain went from an already substantial ten percent to 25 per cent of the newspaper.⁷ Meanwhile, the Politburo authorized the immediate dispatch to Spain of two filmmakers, Roman Karmen and his assistant Boris Makaseev.⁸

Karmen's and Makaseev's heady baptism in war cinematography is indicative of the high value the Kremlin was already placing on the Spanish war and its potential for exploitation in the USSR. The Politburo ordered that the filmmakers depart for Spain on 18 August 1936—exactly one month after the uprising.⁹ The pair travelled by air to Paris, then continued overland to the Spanish border, arriving in the Republican zone on 23 August, where they immediately began filming. Two days later, they sent 600 metres of exposed raw stock back to Moscow. This film was hastily processed and the first edited newsreel, entitled *On the Events in Spain*, debuted in large Soviet cities on 7 September, only three weeks after the Central Committee approved funds for the filmmakers. Karmen and Makaseev would stay in Republican Spain for eleven months, where they shot footage for twenty newsreels, several documentaries, and the feature-length *Ispaniia*, which appeared after the war's conclusion, in 1939.¹⁰

By early September, Soviet citizens were reading daily front-page accounts of the Spanish war, and any visit to the cinema was likely to expose them to recent footage of the conflict. Thus by autumn 1936 the Spanish war had been converted into a cause of enormous ideological and emotional importance to the workers of the USSR. But our topic is full of

6 Print journalists who travelled to Spain left memoir accounts of their experiences. In Spanish, see Mikhail Koltsov, *Diario de la guerra española*, trans. and intro. by José Fernández Sánchez (Madrid: Akal Editor, 1978) and Ilya Ehrenburg, *Corresponsal en España* (Barcelona: Editorial Prensa Ibérica, 1998). In Russian only, see Ovadii Savich, *Dva goda v Ispanii, 1937–1939* (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel, 1981).

7 David Allen, 'The Soviet Union and the Spanish Civil War', PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 1952, 437–38.

8 The filmmakers, too, left memoir accounts, but neither has been translated from the Russian: Roman Karmen, *No Pasaran!* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1972), and Boris Makaseev, 'Iz khroniki geroicheskoi respubliki', in *My internatsionalisty: Vospominaniia sovetskikh dobrovol'tsev-uchastnikov natsional'no-revoliutsionnoi voiny v Ispanii*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Izdat. Politicheskoi Literatury, 1986), 158–64.

9 Politburo Protocol from 17 August 1936, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, del. 980, l, p. 235.

10 For an overview of Russian newsreel production in the Civil War, see Daniel Kowalsky, 'The Soviet Cinematic Offensive in the Spanish Civil War', *Film History*, 19:1 (2007), 7–19 and 'La ofensiva cinematográfica soviética en la Guerra Civil española', *Archivos de la Filmoteca*, 60–61 (2008), 50–77.

paradoxes and caveats. Despite a tremendous concentration of resources, the domestic campaign was only partially successful; the surviving archival and cinematic record indicates that the ostensibly spontaneous nature of the solidarity movement was revealed even at the time as a transparent construct, eliciting more than a little derision and indifference, though also some genuine signs of popular enthusiasm.¹¹

Simultaneously, the Soviet domestic campaign of support for the Republic was duplicated in identical form among the national Communist parties abroad under Comintern direction. Drawing an unambiguous connection between the Spanish rebels and international fascism, the Comintern strategy was to present events in Spain as a direct threat to international Communism and by extension to collective security. On 23 July 1936, at the first Comintern Executive Committee meeting after the rebel uprising, Georgii Dimitrov spoke of the Spanish war's potential for rallying international forces to the side of the Popular Front. The struggle promised, he said, to have 'enormous significance and great influence on the masses'. This potential, Dimitrov concluded, 'must be promoted and advanced'.¹² At the same meeting, the Hungarian representative Ernő Gerő, a member of the Comintern's Roman Secretariat (covering France, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Romania), concurred that the ECCI's first course of action must be 'wide-scale international mobilization'.¹³ In the weeks and months that followed, Comintern representatives staged rallies in numerous European and North American cities and sought worker donations for humanitarian relief. Yet here again the communists achieved at best partial success, at least by the Comintern's own estimation. On numerous occasions, from autumn 1936 until indeed November 1938, the leadership lamented that the campaign required renewing or strengthening and that the Comintern was 'far from exploiting all potential'.¹⁴ One aspect of the Comintern's campaign that did achieve notable success was the recruitment of an army of international volunteers to fight on the side of the Republic—the future International Brigades.

The next stage of Russia's escalating involvement in Spanish affairs saw the Kremlin hasten to effect diplomatic rapprochement with the Spanish Republicans, and thereafter promote Loyalist Spain to an unusually privileged position of ally and friend. On 21 August, the Soviet government appointed Marcel Rosenberg as its ambassador to Madrid. Rosenberg and his

11 For negative reactions to the campaign, gathered by the NKVD, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1999), 171.

12 ECCI Protocol No. 60, 23 July 1936, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 18, del. 1101, 1, p. 15.

13 RGASPI, f. 495, op. 18, del. 1101, 1, p. 32.

14 Manuïlskii report to ECCI session of 20 September 1937, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 2, del. 257, ll, pp. 41–61. The cited lines are from 1, p. 59, and merit reproduction in the original French: 'Les événements d'Espagne doivent être utilisés pour élever sans cesse l'enthousiasme des masses [...] Nous sommes loin d'utiliser toutes les possibilités'.

large staff, including economic and military attachés, arrived in Spain before the end of that month. In late September, this mission was further augmented with the appointment of Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko as consul general to Barcelona.¹⁵ The selection, comportment, and ultimate fate of the Soviet diplomatic corps in Loyalist Spain says much about the Stalinist agenda for Moscow's new Mediterranean ally. First, we note that Moscow appointed well-known figures to their Spanish mission. At the time of his appointment, Rosenberg was a twenty-year veteran of the Soviet diplomatic corps and former Soviet delegate to the League of Nations; similarly, Antonov-Ovseenko was a revolutionary hero and the leader of the assault on the Winter Palace. These reliable old Bolsheviks brought to their posts an undeniable prestige and seriousness, underscoring the Soviet commitment to the Republic. Indeed, that commitment went a bit too far, for the ambassador and consul meddled excessively in both the war effort and internal Spanish politics. They were consequently poorly received by Republican officials, who often refused the Russians' advice and counsel, and who accused them of attempting to rule Spain from their hastily organized embassy. Another paradox: these high level postings were short in duration. By early spring 1937, both the ambassador and consul general had been recalled to Moscow and executed, victims of the Stalinist terror that coincided with the war in Spain.¹⁶ The final ambassadorial replacement kept his head low, and left nary a fingerprint.

The establishment of a new Spanish mission in Moscow, led by the thirty-eight-year-old medical doctor, Marcelino Pascua, was problematic for other reasons. In October 1936 the Soviet government prepared a lavish reception for the new Loyalist ambassador. Optimistic, hoping for genuinely warm relations, the Soviets gave Pascua VIP treatment in Moscow, according him unusual perks that included the lease of a well-appointed, centrally-located free-standing house, the assignment of a state-owned limousine, the use of otherwise restricted communications and mail lines, and unfettered personal access not only to key Soviet ministries but to the leadership itself—to Molotov, Voroshilov and on several occasions even Stalin.¹⁷ Though magnanimous in appearance, the exceptional conditions of Pascua's mission ultimately gave the Kremlin greater influence over the Loyalist ambassador and the Republic's war effort. Indeed, Pascua's own notes from his private meetings with members of the Politburo reveal a remarkably unequal relationship, and hardly what one would expect between sovereign states.

15 Soviet diplomatic appointments are discussed in Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética*, 25–41.

16 Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética*, 36–41.

17 The establishment of Pascua's embassy is covered in Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética*, 42–67. I used unpublished Politburo protocols housed in the former Party Archive together with the ambassador's personal papers at the Archivo Histórico Nacional (Madrid). The decree granting Pascua the detached residence at number 18, Malaia Nikitskaia, appears in Politburo Protocol 128, 23 October 1936, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 982.

In all discussions, Pascua was treated as the subordinate; he was reprimanded when his government did not comply with Soviet wishes, and policies were repeatedly dictated to him by officials from the Defence Commissariat. A paradox: the Kremlin's directives were routinely ignored, and with impunity. At one meeting, Stalin denounced the Republic's rallying call *¡No pasarán!* as excessively passive. You will not win with this slogan, Stalin warned.¹⁸

Despite the obvious opportunities that might have come through diplomatic cooperation with the Russians, the Loyalists paid scant attention to their Moscow embassy, first neglecting, then starving the mission of funds before eventually transferring Pascua to Paris in early 1938. The Republic sent no ambassadorial replacement to Moscow and thus for the balance of the war the Loyalists had no ambassador in the one country that had come to its defence in 1936.¹⁹ This decision would have severe consequences in spring 1939 when the collapse of the Republic left stranded in the USSR several thousand Spanish refugees who could avail themselves of no diplomatic support.

Only one additional note on diplomacy is necessary to illustrate the extraordinary extent to which the USSR sought to bind itself to the Republic. At the Non-Intervention Committee (NIC) in London, formed under British and French leadership to prevent the sale of weaponry to either side in the war, it fell to the Soviet representative Ivan Maiskii to advocate tirelessly on the Republic's behalf. Even as the other signatories looked away blindly, Maiskii railed at every opportunity against German and Italian violations of the neutrality agreement. With Madrid itself barred from participating in the NIC sessions, for the lifetime of the organization Maiskii played the role of Loyalist confederate, giving the Republic's interests an international airing.²⁰ These efforts, like all diplomatic initiatives bringing together the USSR and the Spanish Republic, would ultimately fail.

The Kremlin also undertook a major propaganda campaign to develop cultural relations between the two countries. This included the screening in the Republican zone of dozens of Soviet films as well as the dispatch from the USSR of poster art, phonographic records, and many thousands of volumes of Soviet literature. In the Soviet Union itself, thanks to the active direction of state authorities, all things Spanish were soon the rage. A Spanish exhibit was hastily added to the venerated Museum of the Revolution, a required stop for schoolchildren paying homage to the secular religion of Marxism-Leninism. Literary and theatrical events on Spanish themes dominated

18 Pascua's personal notes of meeting with Stalin, Molotov, and Voroshilov, 3 February 1937, Archivo Histórico Nacional (Madrid) (AHN), Diversos, Marcelino Pascua, Leg. 2, Exp. 6.

19 See Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética*, 42–67.

20 Now over a half-century old, but not beyond its use-by date, the only account of the much-maligned Non-Intervention Committee remains David T. Cattell, *Soviet Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1957).

cultural circles throughout the major cities of the USSR. Nonetheless, apart from the inspirational impact of a handful of Soviet films, such as *We from Kronstadt* and *Chapaev*, few of these cultural exchanges were especially successful. The dissemination of Soviet literature in Spain, for example, was handicapped by a wholesale linguistic failure. Of the thousands of books, posters, films and recordings the Soviets sent to the Republic, nearly all were in Russian, and thus not fit for agit-prop purpose.²¹ At other times, supply of this material from the USSR proved difficult and unreliable. At the end of October, 1936, the Soviet head of propaganda activities in Barcelona grew desperate and beseeched Moscow: 'The task before us is vast and possibly unrealizable. But please send us some material'.²²

In truth, the Kremlin had no prior experience undertaking a propaganda campaign from this distance, nor had it given any priority to Castilian in its overseas relations. Similarly, throughout the course of the Spanish war the Soviet state authorities laboured in vain to provide adequate interpreters and translators not only to carry out its cultural and propaganda work, but, more critically, to allow Soviet advisors and technicians to conference with their counterparts in the Loyalist army, navy and air force. If understanding between the Soviets and Loyalists was handicapped by the lack of a common language, communications between Moscow and Spain suffered from insurmountable technical problems. The direct phone link, first established in October 1936, was often knocked out by Nationalist artillery.²³

And what of Soviet military support? Its highpoint took place during the ten-month stretch between October 1936 and July 1937, when regular shipments of Soviet military aid were sent to Spain, when over one thousand Soviet tank crews and pilots and some 600 advisors were active on the side of the Republic, and when the Comintern-sponsored International Brigades entered the fight alongside the newly organized People's Army. The military aid to the Republic, code-named, sensationally, 'Operation X', was the most logistically challenging military adventure launched by the Soviet armed forces up to that point, to say nothing of the deepest penetration into Western Europe by any Russian military force in history. Under extremely secretive measures, the Soviet navy delivered from 3,500 kilometres away sixty-four shipments of hardware that included some 600,000 tons of war matériel.²⁴ The logistics of delivery, carried out entirely by sea, were

21 On the cultural exchanges between the two countries, see Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética*, 133–90.

22 Sofiia Antonov-Ovseenko to VOKS, 31 October 1936, GARF (State Archive of the Russian Federation), f. 5283, op. 7, del. 840, l, p. 180.

23 See Tim Rees, 'The Highpoint of Comintern Influence? The Communist Party and the Civil War in Spain', in *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919–1943*, ed. Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe (Manchester: Manchester U. P., 1998), 143–67 (p. 150).

24 A. A. Grechko, *Istoriia vtoroi mirovoi voiny*, 2 vols (Moscow: Voennoe izdat. Ministerstva Oborony SSSR, 1974), II, 54, 137.

complicated and dangerous, for they required the Soviets to negotiate, patrol and sometimes mine waters, facing at various times the German, Italian, British and French navies.²⁵ Of course, just as Franco received nothing for free, the dispatch of Soviet arms to the Republic was not an act of charity but carried out as a normal commercial transaction between sovereign states. As compensation for the weaponry, the Madrid government would transfer to the Soviet regime 510 tons of its gold stocks, valued at \$518 million in 1936 prices.²⁶ This was the gold of the Incas and Aztecs, amassed over the centuries by the Spanish crown. Among all components of Soviet participation in the Spanish war, these naval operations—the dispatch of hardware and the evacuation of the gold—would prove the most successful.

Furthermore, it cannot be doubted that the Republic got good value for the gold. The Red Army air force, through its use of advanced I-15 and I-16 fighters and SB bombers, allowed the Republic to regain the advantage in the skies it had lost several weeks into the war. Soviet-led mechanized units, operating the technologically superior T-26 tank, played an instrumental role in supporting Loyalist operations in most of the key battles of the war, not least the battles of Madrid, Guadalajara, Brunete, Teruel and the Ebro.²⁷ Due to the Loyalist reliance on Moscow's arms, Soviet advisors were able to involve themselves in many aspects of the Republic's war effort. For the short-staffed, bottom-heavy Loyalist armed forces, Soviet advice was actively sought and sometimes followed, most notably in the organization of the People's Army in October 1936, which took place through Soviet initiative and which replicated the structure of the Red Army. More significantly, in the last three months of 1936, the defence of Madrid was to a great extent directed by the Soviet military attaché, Vladimir Gorev. In Loyalist waters, too, the Soviets held sway; the *de facto* commander of the embattled Republican navy was the Russian attaché Nikolai Kuznetsov.²⁸

Soviet military assistance was vital, but the quality of arms provided was overall uneven. Although the Kremlin sent its most modern planes and tanks

25 The military intervention is best covered in Rybalkin, *Operatsiia 'X'*.

26 The gold has been revisited many times by Ángel Viñas in *El oro de Moscú* (Barcelona: Grijalbo, 1979), in *El oro español en la Guerra Civil* (Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Fiscales, 1976), and in 'The Financing of the Spanish Civil War', in *Revolution and War in Spain, 1931–1939*, ed. Paul Preston (London: Methuen, 1984), 266–83; and most recently, and definitively, in Viñas, *La soledad de la República*, 373–98.

27 There is no specialized scholarship in any language on Soviet air power in the war. The most up-to-date account of Soviet armour in Spain is Steven J. Zaloga, *Spanish Civil War Tanks: The Proving Ground for Blitzkrieg* (Oxford: Osprey, 2010).

28 Kuznetsov's memoirs have rarely been incorporated into the non-Russian literature on the war, yet they have wide-ranging value, not least in clarifying the logistical problems faced by the Soviet navy in transporting hardware to Spain. See N. G. Kuznetsov, *Nakanune* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1969), *Na dalekom meridiane*, 3rd ed. (Moscow: Nauka, 1988) and, in English, *Memoirs of Wartime Minister of the Navy* (Moscow: Progreso, 1990).

to the Republic, other weapons shipments were not of the same high quality. The small arms provided by the Russians were notoriously obsolete; not a few were antiques, many dating from the First World War, others from the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, and a few perhaps even from the Crimean War. Where rifles, machine-guns, and artillery were concerned, the Soviets sent their Spanish friends weapons that were often in poor repair or exceedingly difficult to maintain and arm. The Soviets delivered rifles of at least eight different nationalities, ten different types, and six different calibres. Nearly a quarter of all rifles supplied to the Republic were 11-mm French and Austrian pieces dating from the 1880s; the 11-mm calibre had been obsolete worldwide since the turn of the century. Similarly, Soviet-supplied machine-guns and heavy guns were sufficiently mixed in origin and date to make reliable ammunition re-supply all but impossible.²⁹

If Soviet-supplied small arms originated from a handful of countries, the men who used them in the conflict were even more cosmopolitan. Indeed, they comprised a veritable Tower of Babel. These were the International Brigades, organized, funded, supplied, and often disciplined by the Comintern. For many years, historians struggled to understand the origins of this fighting force, so unique in global historical terms. It is now clear that the International Brigades were the Comintern manpower sent to Spain to complement the Red Army hardware and officers that were initially mobilized, and thrown into battle, in late October 1936. The central role of Soviet or Soviet-trained advisors in all matters concerning the Brigades' command apparatus cannot be questioned.

Recent archival declassifications now allow us to track with great accuracy the escalation of Soviet mobilization in support of the Republic and pinpoint the precise origins of the Brigades within that process. On 3 August the Comintern passed the first resolution for a 'wide campaign of solidarity with the fighters defending the Republic in Spain'.³⁰ The decision asserted that the campaign should include 'collections of medicines, foodstuffs, [and] gold', as well as the enlistment of medical volunteers and purchase of ambulances. This resolution coincided with the initiation of a solidarity campaign within the Soviet Union, a campaign which proceeded at a breathless pace throughout August and September.³¹ The call was strengthened at the 22 September session, when the Argentine agent Vittorio Codovilla told the ECCI that, 'it is necessary to hasten the international solidarity a little, not only in discourse, but something more concrete'.³² In fact, Codovilla's 'concrete' suggestion had already been suggested and approved. Several days earlier, on

29 Gerald Howson, *Arms for Spain: The Untold Story of the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Murray, 1998), 138–40.

30 ECCI Protocol Nr. 64, 3 August 1936, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 18, del. 1105, l, p. 1.

31 The campaigns are discussed in detail in Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética*, 73–95.

32 ECCI Protocol Nr. 74, 18 September 1936, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 18, del. 1135, l, p. 6.

18 September, the ECCI had approved the ‘recruitment of volunteers having military experience among workers of all countries, with the purpose of sending them to Spain’.³³ In this decision lay the creation of the International Brigades.

The focal point for the early recruitment of the Brigades was Paris, with the organizational aspects handled jointly by the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Italian Communist Party in exile (PCI).³⁴ The leadership was headed by André Marty, head of the PCF, a representative in the Chamber of Deputies and a member of the ECCI. His assistant was PCI stalwart Luigi Longo (a.k.a. ‘Gallo’), who had been active in Spain since shortly after the Nationalist uprising.³⁵ Numerous other foreign Communist nationals also took part in mobilizing international cadres, issuing recruitment quotas to national parties and cells throughout the world, and overseeing their transport to the Spanish border. Among the most active of the early organizers was the Yugoslav Josip Broz (a.k.a. ‘Tito’).

It is striking to note the obvious similarity between the ECCI’s call for general solidarity with the Republic and its recruitment of an international army. In both cases, the Comintern took pains to conceal its own central role in the actions. In organizing the solidarity movement, the Soviet leadership had deceitfully presented the massive humanitarian drive both at home and abroad as a spontaneous act of the people. In forming the Brigades, the ECCI did precisely the same thing, staunchly denying that the convergence on Paris of thousands of young Communists had anything to do with Comintern recruiting. Thus a British party worker declared that the IB ‘arose spontaneously in the minds of men’ and that from ‘the spontaneous movement of the volunteers there naturally arose the decision to form the International Brigades’.³⁶

Though many Communist propagandists doggedly adhered to the notion that the International Brigades formed spontaneously, even during the war itself some Comintern members openly admitted the central role of the ECCI.³⁷ But it was not until the late 1960s that Moscow stated that the ECCI had made the decision in September 1936 ‘to locate among the workers

33 Codavilla report to ECCI, 22 September 1936, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 2, del. 233, ll, pp. 56–99.

34 The best introduction to the formation of the International Brigades (IB) is the work of Rémi Skoutelsky, including: *Novedad en el frente: las Brigadas Internacionales en la Guerra Civil* (Madrid: Ediciones Temas de Hoy, 2006); ‘The Comintern and the International Brigades’, *The Volunteer*, 24:1 (2002), 9–13; and *L’Espoir guidait leur pas: les volontaires français dans les Brigades internationales, 1936–1939* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1998).

35 For Luigi Longo’s version of the IB organization, see *Las Brigadas internacionales en España* (México D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1966).

36 William Rust, *Britons in Spain* (New York: International Publishers, 1939), 5–6.

37 In September 1937, the CPUSA organ *Daily Worker* acknowledged that it had actively recruited cadres. See R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1982), 32.

of different countries volunteers with military experience and send them to fight in Spain'.³⁸ Of course, none of this is to deny that in the first weeks of the war, long before the Comintern became involved, volunteers did appear spontaneously to fight with the Loyalists.³⁹ It was the Comintern, however, that would convert this unorganized trickle into a well-directed flood of new cadres, the engagement of whom would leave a strong imprint on key battles in the first year of the war.

The IB training base in Spain was established near the town of Albacete. It was here that the first 500 volunteers began their service on 14 October 1936. The date is significant—just two days after the Soviet vessel *Komsomol* arrived in Cartagena with fifty Soviet T-26 tanks and their operators.⁴⁰ Over the course of the war, as many as 35,000 foreigners would stream through the Albacete base on their way to the front.⁴¹ These volunteers were overseen by Comintern agents operating under orders from Moscow, in a manner identical to that of the general Soviet advisory apparatus under Operation X. Soviet advisors assigned to various sections of the Republic's military structure invariably worked with the International Brigades as well.⁴²

Along with Russian men and equipment, and the International Brigades, came part of the destructive culture of Stalinism, which demonized and sought to destroy all independent revolutionary elements on the Peninsula, some of which, like the POUM, had lent irreplaceable enthusiasm to the defence of Loyalist Spain. On the whole, however, the extent of Soviet malfeasance in Spain has been exaggerated, both to justify *ex post facto* the Nationalist uprising or to explain away the Republic's defeat. Far more damaging to Loyalist fortunes was the attitude of the Western democracies, which first turned a blind eye to fascist support of the rebels, and then refused to sell Madrid the arms to which the Republic was legally entitled. Most importantly, let us recall that it was Soviet assistance, supplied over a great distance and at considerable risk to the Stalinist regime, that saved the Republic from rapid defeat in the early stages of the war. The continuation of that aid month after month, in a meticulously-planned and perilous

38 *Komunisticheskii Internatsional: Kratkii istoricheskii ocherk* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1969), 460.

39 See Skoutelsky, *L'Espoir guidait leur pas*, 29–54.

40 For the arrival of the IB, see Hugh G. Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 3rd ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster), 456. On the establishment of the Albacete base, see Skoutelsky, *L'Espoir guidait leur pas*, 29–79 and *Novedad en el frente*, 76–84.

41 This is the relatively conservative though by no means final estimate of Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 982–83. Declassified Soviet documents indicate as many as 50,000. See RGASPI, f. 495, op. 76, del. 33, 1, p. 18, cited in M.V. Novikov, *SSSR, Komintern i grazhdanskaia voia v Ispanii 1936–1939*, 2 vols (Iaroslav: Iaroslavskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii universitet, 1995), II, 100.

42 Moscow's role in shaping and overseeing the IB is the subject in part of *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck and Grigory Sevostianov (New Haven: Yale U. P., 2001); see especially 233–60 and 431–73.

operation, and even as most of the world looked at the rebel victory as a *fait accompli*, represented the Republic's only chance of survival.

In one unique area of Soviet-Loyalist relations—the evacuation of 3,000 Spanish children to the USSR—both sides reaped obvious benefits. Rescued from the Basque region as the Northern Front teetered on collapse in mid-1937, the evacuated children lived privileged lives in unusual comfort, housed in fine orphanages and doted on by numberless Soviet caregivers.⁴³ The children evacuated from war-torn Spain to the safety of Soviet cities and towns were fortunate to be out of danger, but the Stalinist regime had much to gain as well. The reception of Spanish children in the Soviet Union presented Moscow with an easily managed and endlessly exploitable propaganda subject. The arrival, reception, and subsequent upbringing of the Spanish children was the source of innumerable Soviet press and radio reports. The value of this propaganda, supported by frequent public appearances by the children as well as published photographs, cannot be overstated. Indeed, the positive news stories of young Iberians happily studying and playing within Soviet borders was not only a foil to the general gloom that enveloped Soviet society during the height of the Stalinist terror, but did much to counter an older though hardly forgotten problem which had plagued the Soviet republics from the early 1920s until the first part of the 1930s: the wave of *besprizorniki*, or 'homeless children', a consequence of the general chaos and dislocation of revolution, civil war, hunger, and forced resettlement.⁴⁴

The final stage of Russia's participation in the Civil War—the twenty-one-month period between June 1937 and the end of the war on 1 April 1939—was marked by a steady ebb in Moscow's involvement with the Republic. Every major indicator of Soviet investment in a Republican victory was now in decline: arms supplies were dramatically scaled back, the diplomatic missions were downgraded and withdrawn, and Soviet flyers and tankers began to be replaced by Republican crews. The earlier agit-prop onslaught also slowed, and in some areas ceased. On the domestic front, the Soviet regime began to disengage the populace from Spanish affairs. The war disappeared into the middle pages of Soviet state newspapers, and in public speeches Soviet leaders mentioned the Republic's cause less and less. In

43 The first study of the topic was Enrique Zafra, *Los niños españoles evacuados a la URSS* (Madrid: Ediciones de la Torre, 1989), though this did not incorporate materials from the Russian archives. Kowalsky's chapter in *La Unión Soviética* (96–120), which quoted unpublished Soviet-era documents, has now been complemented by a number of recent accounts, including Susana Castillo, *Mis años en la escuela soviética* (Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata, 2009) and Inmaculada Colomina Limonero, *Dos patrias, tres mil destinos: vida y exilio de los niños de la Guerra de España refugiados en la Unión Soviética* (Madrid: Cinca, 2010).

44 On the condition of Soviet children in the decade of the thirties, see *Stalinism As a Way of Life: A Narrative in Documents*, ed. Lewis Siegelbaum and Andrei Sokolov (New Haven: Yale U. P., 2000), 356–420.

Russian cinemas, newsreels devoted to the Chinese Communists began trumping coverage of the war in Spain. For the last twenty months of the Spanish Civil War, while the Kremlin may not have altogether given up hope for a Republican victory, the Soviet leadership was noticeably less optimistic.

Stalin has frequently been criticized for abandoning the Republic midway through the war, but recently declassified official documents suggest a more nuanced assessment of Soviet supply patterns over the course of the conflict. The logistics of Operation X certainly became more difficult over time, with various factors conspiring to make transshipping from the USSR expensive, risky, and on some routes practically impossible. As the struggle wore on, the Defence Commissariat became increasingly distressed that future shipments of Soviet weaponry might be intercepted and could never reach the Loyalist zone. More to the point, after the Republic's gold was exhausted in early 1938, any losses would necessarily be incurred directly by the Soviets. But a second development was equally significant in determining supply volume. Even barring the issue of successful delivery, the Soviet technological advantage in the war was conclusively lost by late in the spring of 1937. By that time, the most advanced Russian tanks and planes available could no longer compete with the weaponry being supplied to the rebels. The arrival of the German-made HE-111 and ME-109 rendered the entire Red Air Force fleet of bombers, fighters, and reconnaissance aircraft essentially obsolete. While the Nationalists were never able to match the Russians in armour, the dispatch of large numbers of witheringly effective German anti-tank guns rendered the issue moot.

In sum, after August 1937, even had a safe and efficient transit route from Russia been opened up, no *matériel* then being produced by the Soviet defence industry could have undermined the rebels' widening position of technological domination. In this light, it is hardly surprising that Moscow scaled back its aid in mid 1937, though Stalin did not withdraw completely, but instead remained engaged with the Republic until quite close to its demise. Near the end of the war, Moscow granted the Republic a large line of credit, and renewed arms shipments as late as December 1938.⁴⁵ Very few of those arms could make a difference, however, for the war was lost.

In the first authoritative study devoted to our topic, published posthumously in 1991, Burnett Bolloten asserted that Soviet aid had doomed the Republic. Bolloten argued that Stalin had cynically used the Spanish theatre to flex Soviet muscle, establish a Comintern beachhead in Mediterranean Europe and eliminate ideological enemies. For Bolloten, Stalin had little interest in a Loyalist victory and indeed would eventually

45 The late dispatch of some \$55 million worth of Soviet arms, transferred on seven ships, was for many years considered a myth, yet today declassified documents from the Russian State Military Archive (RGVA) confirm that this did indeed take place. The logistics of the operation, and contents of the delivery, down to the precise number of shells (1,382,540), are revealed in manifests in RGVA f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1259, ll, pp. 85–105.

abandon the Republic to a slow death. Bolloten devoted considerable effort to disproving Loyalist claims that Stalin had granted the Republic a line of credit in December 1938 and had renewed military assistance.⁴⁶ Yet more recent conclusions suggest the need to revise Bolloten's abandonment thesis. By the last days of Operation X, it was clear that in nearly every facet of Soviet involvement, Stalin's position was never one of strength, but rather one of weakness, inexperience or incompetence. In the Spanish theatre, the Soviets possessed none of the requisite characteristics of a strong and imposing foreign power. The Kremlin's physical distance from Spain was so great as to render the problem of extended supply, surveillance, and control all but impossible. The Soviet leadership could barely keep track of its own representatives on the ground, much less infiltrate and control the myriad institutions of Republican Spain. In terms of their sheer numbers, the Soviet presence rarely rose to the level of a token force: just over two thousand Soviet personnel served over the course of the long war—hardly a domineering contribution in a struggle that saw the mobilization of over a million men under arms.⁴⁷ Moreover, two-thirds of all Soviets sent were engaged as relatively low-level pilots, tankers, technicians, and other support staff. In some key battles and on entire fronts, the Soviet presence was almost non-existent. If the Russians' military support to the Republic was ultimately insufficient, the accompanying agit-prop campaign in this so-called *zona roja* was marked by a level of incompetence unbecoming of even the most lacklustre foreign colonizer. In sum, Stalin's interwar Spanish gamble constituted a bold, multi-faceted, and unprecedented projection of Russian power into south-western Europe, but one that was revealed in short order as thoroughly untenable. Stalin's intervention in Spain was enormously ambitious, yet it was an operational failure of roughly the same scale.

The details of Soviet assistance are now clear, yet the motives are not. Why did Stalin choose to intervene? Stalin weighed the decision to enter the war for some eight weeks before committing his forces. More than any other international figure that entered into the conflict—or indeed more than any who declared neutrality—Stalin took the longest to decide on a course of action. Whereas the fascist dictators signalled their allegiance to Franco within a week of the rebel uprising, Stalin reacted cautiously. Soviet entry into the war, in contrast to that of Italy and Germany, was informed by the evolving situation on the ground, the growing peril of the Republic's position, and to the shifting international dynamics that occurred during the summer of 1936.

Several considerations were paramount, and we must assume that each played some part in the eventual decision to support the Republic with large-

46 Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1991), 990–93.

47 See Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética*, 253–58.

scale military assistance. First, there was the pressure from international communism and the international left, which, from the first days of the war, was mobilized in favour of the Republic. That growing wellspring of popular opinion must have reinforced for Stalin the importance of taking a strong position *vis-à-vis* the war. To ignore Spain would be to surrender an opportunity to champion this most popular of causes and thus risk alienating the global left. This ideological justification for involvement would have been complemented, if not superseded, by the second factor: the geo-strategic imperative. That the rise of the fascist powers posed a threat to Soviet security was no longer in doubt in summer 1936. Spain provided Moscow with an opportunity not only to confront fascism, but to do so in a theatre where the communists would have their first chance to test the viability of collective security with Western powers: Britain and especially France.

Barring the discovery of sensational unpublished documents from the perpetually sealed Presidential archive in Moscow, the judicious student of the topic would conclude that Stalin intervened in Spain primarily for reasons of ideology and security, and which of these was more heavily weighted is a matter entirely for conjecture. However, three additional considerations must be added to this discussion, though none can be fully accounted for at present nor their importance quantified with empirical data. First, as Ángel Viñas has recently suggested, there was the paramount Soviet obsession with Trotskyist deviationism, which reached its zenith in the same precise period (August and September 1936) that Stalin debated his decision on Spain.⁴⁸ Indeed, the Soviet purge of perceived Trotskyist enemies at home and abroad was at least as focused and destructive as the engagement with European fascism. Furthermore, the Comintern leadership openly identified the potential success of Trotskyism in Spain as a critical threat to Soviet security. It would be unwise to assume this factor played no role in the decision to enter the war, but again, we are at a loss to offer any proof.

Second, there was the financial motivation in the form of the Spanish gold, sent from Madrid to Moscow in autumn 1936, and which has already been discussed above. This strange and sensational episode has given rise to many theories, not necessarily implausible but without any documentary evidence. It cannot be denied that from a strictly chronological perspective, the gold appears to have played a central role in the events. Stalin approved the blueprint for Operation X on 14 September, one day after Prime Minister Largo Caballero authorized the Loyalist minister of finance, Juan Negrín, to move the gold and silver held in the Bank of Spain in Madrid to a safer location. The mobilization of the gold began on 15 September, the day after Stalin's approval for military support. No document has ever been cited that

48 Ángel Viñas, 'September 1936: Stalin's Decision to Support the Spanish Republic', in *Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Jim Jump (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 146–49.

links these critical events over the three-day period. What Ángel Viñas—in several studies⁴⁹—has made clear is that the gold finally shipped from Cartagena on 25 October, the same week that Soviet hardware, tankers, pilots and advisors first saw action in the Spanish Civil War. More problematic is to quantify what role the gold played in Stalin's thinking. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to reject the assumption that the promise of this sizable infusion of gold into Soviet coffers had some influence on the protracted decision-making process.

And lastly, there was the undeniable benefit the Soviets reaped in having an opportunity to test first-generation weaponry and new theories of engagement. One should not forget that until Spain the Soviets had not waged war for nearly a generation, and new weaponry had not been tested anywhere except within state borders, usually on unarmed civilians. The last major international battles fought by the Red Army were in Poland in 1920, and what a different sort of war that had been; the Soviet defeat on the Vistula was the last great cavalry battle in modern times. In Spain, the Soviets debuted fighters, bombers and the same tank with which they would begin World War II. The meticulous after-action reports on Soviet war *matériel*, filed by officers and technicians, and now housed in the Military Archive, comprise over one million pages. These documents make tedious reading today, but they bear witness to the high value Moscow placed on this Spanish war experience, both for men and machines. Whether or not this was a motivating factor cannot be ascertained, but it was undoubtedly one of the advantages of intervention, regardless which side triumphed.

In the event, the Soviets bet on the losing horse in the Spanish Civil War. The end of Operation X marked not just the passing of an era, but the opening of new chapters in the same epic story. In most respects, and for all involved, the last days brought genuine, unremitting *agonía*. There was, of course, the grisly fate of the Soviet contingent, not a few of whom—like Koltsov, Gorev, Berzin, Shtern, Rosenberg and Antonov-Ovseenko—were executed on their return to Moscow.⁵⁰ And there were the International Brigades languishing in camps in southern France, who had answered the Comintern's call.⁵¹ Now Moscow abandoned them, despite high level attempts to move Stalin to action.

49 See footnote 26.

50 For a comprehensive examination of the fate of Soviet personnel who served in Spain, see Bolloten, *The Spanish Civil War*, 319.

51 The fate of the brigaders and Loyalist exiles, many of whom ended up in Nazi concentration camps, is treated by various scholars, including David Wingeate Pike, *In the Service of Stalin: The Spanish Communists in Exile, 1939–45* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1993), and in Remi Skoutelsky's three important books: *L'Espoir guidait leur pas, Novedad en el Frente*, and, with Michel Lefebvre, *Les Brigades Internationales: images retrouvés* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

In a letter of 26 August 1939 from Georgii Dimitrov and Dimitrii Manuilskii, the Comintern officials pleaded with the Soviet dictator to reconsider the case of the exiles:

Dear Comrade Stalin:

At the present moment in the concentration camps in France there are 6,011 former IB volunteers, out of whom 4,697 are emigrants from states where communists have been driven underground [...]

Comrade Marty, who just returned from France, reports that the extremes of imprisonment in the concentration camps are eating away the volunteers, but with very few exceptions, they are not grumbling, and are maintaining themselves steadfastly, like Bolsheviks; they reject anyone who succumbs to the enemy's attempts to demoralize them [...]

Having exhausted all possibilities for achieving the liberation of these volunteers, we appeal to you, Comrade Stalin, with this favour. Won't you allow into the USSR 3,000–3,500 former fighters of the IB, [provided they are] subject to a thorough examination? In the event the Politburo decides affirmatively to this question, we will produce questionnaires and all materials and a special messenger will be dispatched to occupy himself with these people.

Comradely greetings,

G. Dimitrov

D. Manuilskii⁵²

From Stalin came little relief. Questionnaires, but not salvation. Yet we know that exile in the Soviet Union, even if granted, was no solution. One need only consider the Spanish pilot trainees, stranded in the USSR at the end of the war, or, indeed, the three thousand Basque children and their teachers, also marooned. Their trajectory is one of the most curious of any of the displaced peoples of the twentieth century. They could not be repatriated to Franco's Spain without consequence, yet their star status faded quickly after the fall of Madrid, and they immediately lost their privileged position. The Nazi-Soviet war meant that, as was the case for much of the urban populations in European Russia, the Spanish refugees were forced to migrate east of the Urals. Those who remained had to wait for the death of Stalin, in 1953, to be reunited with their families. Those who had married Russians stayed on, and some of these were sent to Cuba in 1960 to provide linguistic support to Moscow's second major incursion in the Hispanic world. But there were simultaneously many thousands of other Spaniards living against their

52 RGASPI, f. 495, op. 76, d. 22, ll, pp. 36–39.

wishes in the Soviet Union into the 1950s, to wit, the remnants of the Blue Division, captured in the final battles of the Second World War in Europe.⁵³ The fate of the Blue Division, the Basque refugee children, and the Spanish gold opened up the darkest chapter in Soviet-Spanish relations, during which time Stalin himself led a futile campaign, in 1946, to establish a UN-wide embargo of Spain and thus vilify the dictator who came to power with the assistance of the defeated Nazis and Fascists.

53 Scholarship on the Blue Division is now a sizeable subfield of the Second World War. The most comprehensive recent account is Wayne H. Bowen, *Spain during World War II* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2006).