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## THE SOVIET UNION AND THE INTERNATIONAL BRIGADES, 1936–1939

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**Daniel Kowalsky**

School of History and Anthropology, Queen's University - Belfast,  
Belfast, Northern Ireland

*This article's principal conclusion is twofold: First, that the creation and sustenance of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War was part of Stalin's goal of linking the Loyalist cause with that of the Soviet Union and international communism, a component of a larger geo-strategic gamble which sought to create united opposition to fascist aggression, one which might eventually bring Moscow and the West into a closer alliance. The second conclusion is that the deployment of the Brigades, like the broader projection of Soviet power and influence into the Spanish theater, was an overly ambitious operational failure whose abortive retreat is indicative of the basic weakness of the Stalinist regime in the years prior to the Second World War.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The signing of the August 1936 Non-Intervention Agreement by twenty-seven European states put the Spanish Republic in a precarious military position. Were it to find no normal channels for buying modern military weaponry, the Madrid government would soon fall to the rapidly advancing rebel forces, who by late July were being supported by the modern armies and air forces of the fascist powers. The Loyalist leadership grudgingly accepted a Soviet offer of assistance, which would eventually comprise three principal components: modern tanks, planes and other military hardware dispatched by sea from the Soviet Union; Soviet advisors and technicians who could operate this equipment or instruct Loyalist and

international cadres in its deployment; and the mobilization on the side of the Republic of an international volunteer army: the International Brigades.

The decision to accept Soviet and Comintern assistance was not without attendant risks. The *Catch-22* of Soviet and Communist intervention on the side of Madrid was the following: In accepting Moscow's help the Republic could stave off defeat and reorganize its army, all while continuing to lobby the West to support its cause. Yet in permitting the Soviets to mobilize on the Loyalist side, the Republic risked completing its alienation from the West and even increasing international sympathy for the insurgents. In sum, Western abandonment condemned the Republic to an impossible predicament. Communist participation and assistance, which could not reasonably be refused, was as likely to doom the Loyalist cause as save it.

If the rules and risks were clear enough at the commencement of Soviet aid, subsequent events and revelations made the equation more complicated, and vindicated both those who initially doubted the advisability in striking a deal with Moscow and those who supported it. On the one hand, Soviet hardware in autumn 1936 (though not, importantly, after summer 1937) was among the most advanced in the world and Moscow's fighters and tanks had no equals in the Italian or German arsenals. Similarly, the enthusiasm and bravery of the brigadistas provided Loyalist morale with a much needed shot in the arm. One plausible outcome of communist intervention might well have been the sudden defeat of the rebel movement, a possibility that nearly became reality following the dramatic, simultaneous entry into the war on the Madrid front, in late-October and early November 1936, of Soviet hardware and technicians, and the Comintern-trained brigadistas. It was during this battle that the tide of the war turned decisively, if fleetingly, to the Republic's advantage. At the same time, along with Stalin's excellent air force and armor came a great deal of obsolete small arms, to say nothing of some portion of the poisonous and paranoid culture of Stalinism. Whatever benefit the Republic reaped from the I-15 fighters or T-26 tanks, and the tens of thousands of International Brigade recruits, it paid a high price in the political infighting and chaos that the Communists' presence engendered. Indeed, the ultimate cost was greater still, for the Loyalist government, to cover its war debt to the Russians, was forced to send Stalin the gold stocks housed for centuries in the Bank of Spain. Let us examine the circumstances that paved the way for Moscow's unprecedented incursion into Iberian affairs.

### ***SOVIET INVOLVEMENT IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR***

Prior to the civil war of 1936, Spain had never loomed large in the Russian imagination. Isolated in the opposite corner of the European landmass, Spain and Russia largely ignored one another. 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 exchange agreements. 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.<sup>1</sup> In response to their 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 very 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 Soviet people and Kremlin leadership.

Given the historically scant interest in Spanish affairs, and the paucity of proper contacts in 1936, it is no surprise that the Kremlin was slow to respond to the outbreak of hostilities, and did not immediately take a firm position, much less appreciate the magnitude and likely duration of the war. During the two weeks from 18 July to 2 August, the Kremlin took no definite action whatsoever, instead gathering as much information as possible through consultations with Comintern agents on the ground and diplomatic officials in Western Europe. It was only on the third day of August that the Stalinist regime began to implement a bold policy in reaction to the events in Spain, one with no precedent in recent Russian history. From late-summer to mid-autumn, in piecemeal fashion, Stalin would gradually enmesh the Soviet Union in the Spanish imbroglio.

The creation and mobilization of the IB took place during a period of rapid Soviet rapprochement with the formerly estranged Spanish Republic. Indeed, it is striking how quickly Moscow acted to convert events on the distant Iberian Peninsula—as noted, a region with no discernable place in Soviet society of the mid-1930s—into a cause for which the Soviet populace and the international communist faithful was compelled to noisily demonstrate their support, make sizable individual contributions for humanitarian aid, and, in the case of overseas party members, enlist to fight in Spain. The Soviet regime relentlessly promoted a propaganda campaign which sought, on the one hand, to underline the parallels between the earlier Russian civil war and the current conflict in Spain, and simultaneously to present Franco's Nationalist movement as part of a

<sup>1</sup>On diplomatic rapprochement, see *Dokumenty vneshej politiki SSSR*. (Moscow: Izdatelstvo politicheskoi literatury, 1977) (hereafter, *DVP SSSR*), 26: pp. 464–465, and *Izvestiia* and *Pravda*, 29 July 1933. The material is covered in detail in Daniel Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética y la guerra civil española* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2003), pp. 13–17.

larger, anti-communist international fascist conspiracy. In an effort initiated and coordinated by the Politburo beginning on 3 August, public rallies of up to 120,000 people were held in dozens of Soviet cities and towns.<sup>2</sup> At the same time that the Politburo was promoting this domestic solidarity campaign, the Comintern began a similar campaign internationally.<sup>3</sup> To encourage this popular mobilization, the Kremlin directed the state-run media to provide saturation coverage of all aspects of the civil war and the heavily engineered domestic reactions to it. Thus from the early days of the war, then, the Kremlin sought to rapidly elevate the position of Spain among both the Soviet public and communist parties worldwide.

The Kremlin's initial commitment to exploiting Spain's misfortunes domestically, and thus pulling the Republic into the Soviet orbit, is most clearly manifested in several decisions made in the first two weeks of the solidarity campaign. On 6 August, the government sent *Pravda* correspondent Mikhail Koltsov to begin covering the war directly from the Republican zone.<sup>4</sup> Soon thereafter, he would be joined by *Izvestiia* reporter Ilya Ehrenburg. On 17 August, the Politburo authorized the immediate dispatch to Madrid of two young Soviet filmmakers, Roman Karmen and Boris Makaseev.<sup>5</sup> Three weeks later, their newsreels from the front were already being screened in Moscow theaters.<sup>6</sup> By the middle of 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. The same content provided to the Soviet media by the journalists and filmmakers would be used in the international Comintern propaganda campaign, intended first to raise humanitarian relief for the Loyalist side, and later to encourage the enlistment of recruits for the IB.

The next stage of the USSR's escalating involvement in Spanish affairs—the approximately six weeks from 21 August to 1 October—saw the Kremlin hasten to effect diplomatic rapprochement with the Spanish Republicans, and thereafter promote Loyalist Spain to an unusually privileged

<sup>2</sup>*Pravda*, 4 and 5 Aug. 1936; *Izvestiia*, 4 and 5 Aug. 1936; *Trud*, 4 and 5 Aug. 1936.

<sup>3</sup>ECCI Protocol No. 64, 3 Aug. 1936. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, hereafter, RGASPI) (formerly Rossiiskii Tsentr Khraneniia i Izucheniiia Dokumentov Noveishei Istorii, or RTsKhIDNI), f. 495, op. 18, del. 1105, l. 1.

<sup>4</sup>See Mikhail Koltsov, *Diario de la guerra de española* (Madrid: Akal, 1978), pp. 1–7.

<sup>5</sup>Politburo Protocol from 17 Aug. 1936. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, del. 980, l. 235. The two filmmakers have left several memoir accounts of their experiences in Spain: Roman Karmen, *No Pasaran!* (Moscow: Sovetskaiia Rossiiia, 1972), and Boris Makaseev, “Iz khroniki geroicheskoi respubliki,” in *My internationalisty: Vospominaniia sovetskikh dobrovol'tsev-uchastnikov natsional'no-revolutionnoi voiny v Ispanii*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Moscow: Izdat. Politicheskoi Literatury, 1986), pp. 158–164.

<sup>6</sup>*Pravda*, 5 Sept. 1936.

position of ally and friend. On 21 August, the Soviet government appointed Marcel Rosenberg as its ambassador to Madrid. Rosenberg and his large staff, including economic and military attachés, arrived before the end of the month. In late September, this mission were further augmented with the appointment of Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko as consul general to Barcelona.<sup>7</sup>

The selection, comportment, and ultimate fate of the Soviet diplomatic corps in Loyalist Spain tells us much about the Stalinist agenda for Moscow's new Mediterranean ally. First, let us observe that Moscow appointed very 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 refused the Russians' advice and consol, and who accused them, with justification, of attempting to rule Spain from their hastily organized embassy. "Rosenberg," complained one Loyalist official, "acts like a viceroy in Spain."<sup>8</sup> In any event, these high level postings were short in duration. By early winter 1937, both the ambassador and consul general had been recalled to Moscow and executed.<sup>9</sup> Nor did Madrid's new representative in Moscow, Marcelino Pascua, succeed in creating a lasting or stable mission. Pascua's embassy was poorly supported from the start, the ambassador being transferred to Paris in early 1938 and never replaced.<sup>10</sup>

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 civil war, it fell to the Soviet representative Ivan Maiskii to advocate tirelessly on the Republic's behalf. Even has 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

<sup>7</sup>RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, del. 980, l. 308 and del. 981, l. 213.

<sup>8</sup>Luis Araquistain, *La intervención de Rusia en el conflicto Español: Revelaciones de un Ex-Embajador de la República Española* (San José, Costa Rica: [s.n.] 1939), 11.

<sup>9</sup>Kowalsky, pp. 36–41.

<sup>10</sup>On Pascua's mission to Moscow, see Kowalsky, pp. 42–67.

organization Maiskii played the role of Loyalist confederate, giving the Republic's interests an international airing.<sup>11</sup>

We turn our attention next to Soviet military support and intervention, the highpoint of which took place in a concentrated ten-month stretch between October 1936 to July 1937, when regular shipments of military aid were sent to Spain, and over one thousand Soviet tank crews and pilots and some 600 advisors were active on the side of the Republic, and the International Brigades were organized to fight alongside the Popular People's Army. Initially approved by Stalin on 14 September, the military support enterprise, "Operation X," was the most logically 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 exceedingly secretive measures, the Soviet navy delivered from 3500 km sixty-six shipments of hardware. The logistics of delivery, carried out entirely by sea, were complicated and difficult, for they required the Soviets to negotiate patrolled and sometimes mined waters, facing at various times the German, Italian, British and French navies.<sup>12</sup>

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; often, their advice was actively sought by Loyalist officers. The organization of the Popular Army in October 1936 took place through Soviet initiative, and indeed replicated the structure of the Red Army.<sup>13</sup> Occurring at the same time, the defense of Madrid was to a great extent directed by the Soviet military attaché, Vladimir Gorev,<sup>14</sup> and the *de facto* commander of the embattled Republican navy was the Russian attaché Nicolai Kuznetsov.<sup>15</sup> But the civil war institution that would bear the clearest Soviet imprint would be the International Brigades.

<sup>11</sup>See David Cattell, *Soviet Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

<sup>12</sup>The military intervention is best covered in Iurii E. Ribalkin, *Operatsia "X": Sovetskaia voennaia pomoshch' respublikanskoi Ispanii (1936–1939)*. Moscow: AIRO-XX, 2000.

<sup>13</sup>M.T. Meshcheriakov, "Narodnaia armia Ispanskoi respublikii," *Voprosy istorii* 11 (1979): p. 48.

<sup>14</sup>For a discussion of Gorev's role in the defense of Madrid, see Louis Fischer, *Men and Politics* (London: Cape, 1941), pp. 362, 398; Burnett Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution in Spain, 1936–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 489–491. Somewhat more hyperbolic is Starinov's memoir *Over the Abyss* (New York: Ivy Books, 1995), pp. 74, 75.

<sup>15</sup>On the activities of the Russian naval advisor, see Kuznetsov's personal account of his Spanish service, "Con los marinos españoles en su guerra nacional-revolucionaria," in *Bajo la bandera de la España republicana* (Moscow: Progreso, 1967).

## THE SOVIET UNION AND THE ORGANIZATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL BRIGADES

The organization of the International Brigades (IB) was technically the work of the Comintern, and not the Soviet government nor any of its ministries. Nonetheless, the central role of Soviet or Soviet-trained advisors in all matters concerning the IB command apparatus cannot be questioned. Recent archival declassifications now allow us track with great accuracy the escalation of Soviet mobilization in support of the Republic and pinpoint the precise origins of the IB. On 3 August the Comintern passed the first resolution for a “wide campaign of solidarity with the fighters defending the Republic in Spain.”<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, Codovilla’s “concrete” suggestion had already been suggested and approved. Several days earlier, on 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.”<sup>19</sup> In this decision lay the creation of the International Brigades.

The focal point for the early recruitment of the IB was Paris, with the organizational aspects handled jointly by the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Italian Communist Party in exile (PCI).<sup>20</sup> The initial leadership was headed by André Marty, the 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

<sup>16</sup>ECCI Protocol Nr. 64, 3 Aug. 1936. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History; hereafter, RGASPI), f. 495, op. 18, del. 1105, l. 1.

<sup>17</sup>The campaigns are discussed in detail in Daniel Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética y la guerra civil española* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2003), pp. 73–95.

<sup>18</sup>ECCI Protocol Nr. 74, 18 Sept. 1936. RGASPI, f. 495, op. 18, del. 1135. l. 6.

<sup>19</sup>Codavilla report to ECCI, 22 Sept. 1936. RGASPI, f. 495, op. 2, del. 233, ll. pp. 56–99.

<sup>20</sup>The best introduction to the formation of the 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,” in *The Volunteer* 24 (1, March 2002): pp. 9–13, and *L’espoir guidait leur pas: Les volontaires français dans les Brigades internationales, 1936–1939* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1998).

shortly after the Nationalist uprising.<sup>21</sup> 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 organizing 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 IB, 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."<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> 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 of different countries volunteers with military experience and send them to fight in Spain."<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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 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 *Komsomol* arrived in Cartagena with fifty Soviet T-26 tanks and their operators.<sup>26</sup> Over the

<sup>21</sup>For Longo's version of the IB organization, see Luigi Longo, *Las Brigadas internacionales en España* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1966).

<sup>22</sup>William Rust, *Britons in Spain* (New York: International Publishers, 1939), pp. 5–6.

<sup>23</sup>In September 1937, the CPUSA organ *Daily Worker* acknowledged that it had actively recruited cadres. See Richardson, *Comintern Army*, p. 32.

<sup>24</sup>*Komunisticheskii Internatsional: Kratkii istoricheskii ocherk* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1969), p. 460.

<sup>25</sup>See Skoutelsky, *L'espoir guidait leur pas*, pp. 29–54.

<sup>26</sup>For the arrival of the IB, see Thomas, *Spanish Civil War*, 456. On the establishment of the Albacete base, see Skoutelsky, *L'Espoir*, pp. 29–79, and Novedad, pp. 76–84.

course of the war, as many as 35,000 foreigners would stream through the Albacete base on their way to the front.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup>

It is as paradoxical as it is certain that no Soviet nationals served as volunteers in the IB. Some 2200 Soviets served in various capacities in the Spanish war, dispatched with the Red Army as part of Operation X, but these individuals did not overlap with the separate cadres of the IB. Whereas the IB was in the purest sense a volunteer army, this could not be said of Soviet forces engaged to serve in Spain. Far from allowing volunteers to enlist for duty in Europe's distant southwest, the Soviet Defense Commissariat established a highly classified and exclusive selection process to provide the Republic with Soviet military specialists. With the exception of interpreters, nearly all candidates for the Spanish mission were selected from various Defense Commissariat service branches.<sup>29</sup>

Like Italy, the Soviet Union long held that all of its nationals sent to the Iberian Peninsula were volunteers. This was a convenient way of bypassing the rules of the Non-Intervention Agreement; the Soviets could admit that some of its citizens were in Spain while denying that they represented the Soviet government. Excepting the pre-1991 Russian-language historiography, which repeated the official position, most chroniclers of the war have derided the Kremlin's statements about Soviet "volunteers" as pure fiction. The critics are hardly on shaky ground. All Soviet personnel in Spain were part of the rigidly organized Operation X, which was planned and initiated at the highest levels, and were thus nothing if not official representatives of the regime. They were not volunteers in the same sense as the *brigadistas*, who responded to general calls by Communist cells throughout the world, often in defiance of their own governments.

Yet the matter should not be so summarily dismissed. To be certain, many citizens of Russia and the neighboring Soviet Republics *did* in fact volunteer to serve in Spain. This point is frequently made in the Soviet memoir

<sup>27</sup>This is the relatively conservative though by no means final estimate of Thomas (*Spanish Civil War*, pp. 982–983). Declassified Soviet documents indicate as many as 50,000. See RGASPI, f. 495, op. 76, del. 33, l. 18. Cited in Novikov, *SSSR, Komintern i grazhdanskaia*, vol. II, 100. The estimates will be debated endlessly, though not here.

<sup>28</sup>Moscow's role in shaping and overseeing the IB is the subject in part of Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck and Grigory Sevostianov, eds. *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001). See especially pp. 233–260 and pp. 431–473.

<sup>29</sup>Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv (Russian State Military Archive or RGVA), f. 33987, op. 3, del. 893, ll. pp. 207–208.

accounts of the war; the Red Army advisor Malinovsky, in addition to claiming that his appointment to Spain was the result of his own initiative, writes of an “endless avalanche” of similar requests submitted to the Defense Commissariat.<sup>30</sup> The aviation advisor M. Iakushin claimed that he was assigned to Spain only after “multiple requests and solicitations.”<sup>31</sup> The same position is maintained by foreign observers of the popular Soviet reaction to the war, one of whom claims that “thousands of young people volunteered to go to fight in Spain.”<sup>32</sup> The Republic’s ambassador in Moscow reported to Madrid as early as 22 October 1936—two weeks after taking his post—that his embassy was already receiving individual offers to fight on the side of the Republic.<sup>33</sup> By the summer of 1937, the initial trickle had become a steady stream of Soviet citizens attempting to go to Spain. In Pascua’s words,

[q]ualified engineers, mechanics and other persons very often present themselves at the embassy, soliciting information on how they might obtain Spanish citizenship or be permitted to depart for Spain in order to assist us in the war and permanently incorporate themselves into our country.<sup>34</sup>

None of this should be surprising. The Politburo’s energetic mobilization of the campaign of solidarity with the Republic, begun just two weeks into the war, had raised the Loyalist cause to a unique position in the Soviet imagination. Nonetheless, there is no evidence that any Russian who volunteered to serve in Spain was ever sent, either as part of Operation X or the IB. Indeed, the very nature of Stalin’s dictatorship, the secrecy of Operation X, and Moscow’s firm denials of both Soviet military involvement during the Spanish war and its lead role in creating the IB makes the very notion of free and open enlistment unlikely if not impossible.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup>R. Malinovsky, “Torbellinos de ira en España,” in *Bajo la bandera de la España republicana* (Moscow: Progreso, 1967), p. 8.

<sup>31</sup>M. Yakushin, “En la primera batalla contra el fascismo,” in *Bajo la bandera*, p. 343.

<sup>32</sup>Mary M. Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 130.

<sup>33</sup>Pascua to Madrid, 22 Oct. 1936. Archivo Histórico Nacional - Madrid (AHN). Diversos. M. Pascua, leg. 2, exp. 9–4.

<sup>34</sup>AHN-Madrid. Diversos. M. Pascua, leg. 2, exp. 13–14. The letter, addressed to Julian Zugazagoitia, is dated 31 Jul. 1937.

<sup>35</sup>It should be underlined that, although the Red Army took no volunteers for its operation in Spain, many Soviet citizens did volunteer. The point should not be belabored, although the secondary literature continues to scoff at the notion of genuine manifestations of Soviet sympathy with the Republican cause. In a recent survey of the International Brigade, for example, Ricardo de la Cierva declares condescendingly, “Can anyone imagine the existence of a single volunteer, in the Western sense of the word, in Joseph Stalin’s USSR?” See Ricardo de la Cierva, *Brigadas Internacionales, 1936–1939: La verdadera historia* (Madrid: Fénix, 1997), p. 167.

## COMBINED RED ARMY AND INTERNATIONAL BRIGADE OPERATIONS

If Moscow thus ran two entirely distinct military operations in the Spanish theater — the Red Army's Operation X and the Comintern-run IB — they nonetheless collaborated frequently, engaged as they were on the side of the Loyalist People's Army. Moreover, the two operations would be revealed over the course of the war as parallel failures — military projects that, as we shall see, ran afoul on account of identical causes and defects. Where Soviet technicians saw the greatest degree of cooperation was in the area of tank warfare, or mixed tank and infantry operations. Indeed, the state of the Republic's tank capabilities at the beginning of the war, and the development and use of armor throughout the conflict, ensured that armored warfare would be the domain primarily of foreigners.

Prior to the July uprising, the Spanish army possessed two tank regiments, both of which were composed of French-made Renault FT-17s dating from the First World War. Out of eighteen total machines, the government retained ten and the rebels eight.<sup>36</sup> Though numerically superior, the Republican regiment was rather weaker, with its armor in disrepair and its crews poorly trained; it was never to play a significant role in any campaign of the war.<sup>37</sup> The Nationalist tank regiment was the stronger of the two, and it was deployed immediately and to considerable effect. By any reckoning, the Republic's need for new tanks and armored vehicles was significant.

On 12 October 1936, the first fifty Soviet tanks and forty armored cars arrived at Cartagena on the *Komsomol*.<sup>38</sup> Aboard the same supply vessel were fifty Soviet tankers and their commanding officer, Colonel S. M. Krivoshein, who would eventually learn that the armor specialists were to serve as instructors for Republican and IB tankers at a training center established in the spa village of Archena, some 90 kilometers from the port. Unlike Soviet pilots, who were sent specifically to fly for the Republic, the Soviet tankers were not originally intended to see direct action in Spain. Within weeks, however, the impending rebel threat to the capital forced the government to scale back the training effort and hastily transfer some machines and men from the Krivoshein group directly to the central front around Madrid.

<sup>36</sup>See Gerald Howson, *Arms for Spain: The Untold Story of the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Murray, 1998), p. 30.

<sup>37</sup>On the early division of Spain's armor, see Javier de Mazarrasa, *Los carros de combate en la Guerra de España, 1936–1939* (Valladolid: Quirón, 1998), pp. 9–35; and Antonio J. Candil, "Aid Mission to Republicans: Tested Doctrine and Equipment," *Armor* (Mar.–Apr. 1999): pp. 31–32.

<sup>38</sup>See M.T. Meshcheriakov, *Ispanskaia respublika i Komintern: Natsional'no-revoliutsionnaia voina ispanskogo naroda i politika kommunisticheskogo internatsionala, 1936–1939 gg.* (Moscow: Mysl', 1981), p. 52.

On 26 October, the first company was formed from fifteen tanks and a selection of Soviet tank instructors and specialists. The commanding officer was Captain Pavel Arman.<sup>39</sup> The most advanced Republican and IB trainees were assigned to tank crews as gun loaders. On 29 October, one day after the first Soviet SB-2 bomber sorties were launched over the capital, Arman's upstart company entered action in Seseña, some 15 kilometers from the approaches to Madrid.<sup>40</sup> The initiation of the T-26 tank in the Spanish war was, like that of the Soviet high-speed bombers, a dramatic if uneven performance—a triumph for Loyalist morale, but a tactical fiasco. Part of the problem, revealed early on but never corrected, stemmed from the practice of throwing together without adequate preparation Soviet technicians and IB cadres.

On 26 November, a fresh tank contingent arrived at Cartagena aboard the *Chicherin*. Reinforcements included 56 T-26 tanks and 155 tank specialists under the command of D. G. Pavlov and staff chief A. A. Shukhardin.<sup>41</sup> The personnel had been drawn largely from a Byelorussian academy for mechanized warfare. As with Krivoshein's group, the new force was immediately transferred to the Archena tank base, where they would collaborate with and train IB volunteers. At Archena, the new Soviet men and machines formed the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Brigade (*1.a Brigada Blindada*). This brigade was split into two battalions, one under the command of Major M. P. Petrov, the other under Captain V. I. Baranov. Although trainees had not performed especially well in the October and November battles around Madrid, the Kremlin had once again sent too few Soviet tankers to fully man the new brigade. Consequently, in the new formations, 60 percent of the crews and commanders were Soviet, while the remaining 40 percent were either Spanish or international trainees.<sup>42</sup>

The second week of the new year saw the Petrov and Baranov battalions enter action for the first time between the villages of Las Rosas and Majadahonda, northwest of Madrid. The Russian tanks, operated now by a mixed crew of Russian advisors and mostly IB cadres, were able to achieve some success in coordinating their assault with the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>

<sup>39</sup>V. A. Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniia: Opyt i uroki internatsional'noi pomoshch'i (1936–1939)," Ph.D. diss. (Leningrad, 1991), p. 124. Arman, a Latvian and the son of Lenin's sometime lover, Inessa Arman, went on to command a Soviet tank division in World War II. He was killed in combat on the Volyov front in August 1943.

<sup>40</sup>RGVA, f. 31811, op. 4, del. 28, ll. pp. 104–110.

<sup>41</sup>TsAMO, f. 16, op. 3148, del. 5, l. 19. Cited in Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch' Sovetskogo Soiuza ispanskому narodu v natsional'no-revolutsionnoi voine 1936–1939," Ph.D. diss. (Institute of Military History, Moscow, 1992), p. 136.

<sup>42</sup>Ribalkin, *Operatsiia "X": Sovetskaia voennaia pomoshch' respublikanskoi Ispanii (1936–1939)* (Moscow: "AIRO-XX," 2000), p. 70.

International Brigade infantry, although this advantage was offset by a conspicuous lack of artillery and air support. By day's end, however, the infantry failed to keep up with the armor, and the Seseña experience was repeated, though at a far greater cost, thanks to the recent arrival of efficient German and Italian anti-tank guns.<sup>43</sup>

The brigade's showing at the battle of Jarama (6–27 February 1937) continued the earlier negative trend. Although the Nationalist forces enjoyed numerical superiority in the engagement—seventy tanks to the Republic's forty-seven—the issue of quantity was of negligible importance, given that the T-26 was so much superior to the German and Italian models possessed by the rebels.<sup>44</sup> During several attacks, the Soviet tanks at Jarama were able to better coordinate their movements with the infantry. This tactical integration proved successful, and in an engagement on 14 February the combined Loyalist forces routed several Nationalist companies, claiming some thousand killed or wounded.<sup>45</sup> Yet, if some Soviet military analysts considered Jarama an improvement in terms of tactics, no one could deny the heavy price: of the forty-seven Soviet tanks which participated in the engagement, thirty-four, or 72.4 percent, were damaged or destroyed, most of these at the hands of the superior German-made 37-mm gun.

The tank brigade's tactical lessons of Jarama were exploited in the war's next major engagement, the battle of Guadalajara (8–22 March 1937), which coincided with the third major shipment of Soviet tanks. On 6 March, sixty T-26s arrived aboard the *Cabo Santo Tome*, and two days later another forty on the *Darro*. Despite this major reinforcement of armor, Guadalajara would be more of a victory for Russian air power and the IB than the mechanized forces. During two weeks of fighting, the Republican tank brigade operated in close concert with the infantry and artillery. Small groups of three to five tanks were attached to each infantry brigade, and this effective combination helped decide the outcome, soon known as a disaster for the Italian Expeditionary Corps.<sup>46</sup> For the Russian brigade, however, it was a Pyrrhic victory. Of the seventy-two Soviet tanks that participated, twenty-eight, or 38.9 percent, were damaged or destroyed, hardly a dramatic improvement over the losses sustained

<sup>43</sup>Russian tank activities at Majadahonda are not well documented. For brief summaries, see Zaloga, "Soviet Tank Operations," p. 140, and Thomas, *Spanish Civil War*, p. 480.

<sup>44</sup>*Voina v Ispanii*, vyp. 10. *Tanki v oborone* (Moscow: Gos. voennoe izdat., 1938), 3; RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1057, l. 67.

<sup>45</sup>The engagement was subsequently lauded by Red Army planners as a highly successful example of tank use with the infantry. For a discussion, see Zaloga, "Soviet Tank Operations," 160, n. 30.

<sup>46</sup>RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 912, l. 157; f. 35082, op. 1, del. 24, ll. 97–98. *Voina v Ispanii*, vyp. I. *Vazhneishie operatsii na Tsentral'nom fronte* (Moscow: Gos. voennoe izdat., 1937), p. 87.

earlier. In the next two major engagements, Republican tanks registered similar losses. At Casa de Campo (5–12 May, 1937), 23 of 84 active tanks, or 27.4 percent, were damaged or destroyed. At Brunete (6–28 July, 1937), total losses were 47 of 132 tanks, or 35.5 percent. In the coming battles of Fuentes del Ebro and Teruel the fortunes of Republican tank units would take a decisive turn for the worse.

In the summer of 1937, a new Soviet tank arrived in Spain: the BT-5 fast tank, a twenty-ton machine capable of traveling at 40 kilometers per hour, equipped with 60-mm armor, three machine-guns, and a 45-mm anti-tank cannon identical to that on the T-26. Unlike the T-26, the BT-5 fast tank was not designed for infantry support, but instead was intended as an independent, deep maneuver vehicle. The first and only shipment of fifty BT-5s arrived at Cartagena aboard the *Cabo San Agustin* on 10 August. After some delay in deployment, these units were incorporated into the new International Tank Regiment, commanded by Colonel S. I. Kondrat'ev.

Though considered the premier vehicle in the Red Army's new mechanized arsenal, various conditions in Spain militated against the BT-5's success. To begin, by mid-1937 few experienced Russian tankers were available to man the crews that would operate the fast tanks. IB cadres and Spanish graduates of the training programs operated in the USSR and at Archena gradually took over many aspects of tank operations. The post of driver-mechanic was generally filled by a brigadista who had been trained in the Soviet military academies. Often these crewmen were of Bulgarian, Czech, German, or Austrian origin.<sup>47</sup> Spaniards, who had less experience with Soviet armor, usually served in the multi-national crew only as gun loaders.<sup>48</sup> Thus many crews were composed of a Russian commander, an IB technician, and a Spanish loader. The language barriers between these crew members, coupled with their disparate levels of expertise, frequently led to confusion, accidents, or worse.<sup>49</sup> In his September 1937 report to the Defense Commissariat, Shtern asserted that this new crew composition was highly problematic. In both the air force and tank units, he argued, the increased numbers of Spaniards operating machines had led to more accidents.<sup>50</sup> Part of the problem had to do with the nature of the training on the ground in Republican Spain. To conserve fuel and minimize wear and tear on the equipment, local recruits were

<sup>47</sup>S.M. Krivoshein, "Tankisty-dobrovol'tsy v boiakh za Madrid," in *Pod znamenem Ispan-skoj respubliki*, p. 466.

<sup>48</sup>M.V. Novikov, *SSSR, Komintern i grazhdanskaia voia v Ispanii 1936–1939*, 2 vols. (Iaroslav: Iaroslavskii gos. pedagogicheskii universitet, 1995) vol. II: p. 66.

<sup>49</sup>Vetrov, *Voluntary svobody*, p. 262.

<sup>50</sup>Archive of the Central Committee of the Spanish Communist Party (CC PCE). Tesis y manuscritos. 19/10, no.17, 176. The original report is located in RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 961, ll. 131–175.

drilled in stationary tanks, with no opportunity to acquire even a simulated sense of battle.<sup>51</sup>

In the remaining major tank engagements — in October 1937, at Fuentes de Ebro, and in December 1937 and January 1938 at Teruel — a decreasing number of Soviet armor technicians continued to work closely with IB cadres, but with similar lackluster results. Much of the problem had to do with a perennial paucity of Soviet advisors, who formed a small minority of tankers by late 1937. A report issued after the Fuentes de Ebro operation indicated that only approximately eighty Soviet tankers remained.<sup>52</sup>

Teruel would be the last battle where Soviet tankers would play a prominent role. From then on, tank crews were almost entirely composed of Spaniards or brigadistas, though most of even the latter would be withdrawn by the summer of 1938.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, as early as October 1937 a field report to Voroshilov asserted that, apart from the Soviet tankers already in Spain, no additional cadres—with the exception of tank advisors—needed to be sent.<sup>54</sup> Few new tanks were sent either, probably no more than the twenty-five T-26s that arrived aboard the *Gravelines* on 13 March 1938. Though Russian-made armor and a handful of advisors continued to play a role in the war up until the end, for all intents and purposes the Soviet mechanized contribution to the Loyalists ended in late 1937, and with it the IB's hopes a making a strong contribution in mechanized warfare.

What may be said in conclusion regarding Soviet tankers and their IB trainees in the Spanish civil war? In general, the basic weakness of Operation X was transferred directly to Soviet cooperation with the mechanized units of the IB. Each component undertrained, poorly equipped and inadequately supported, Soviet tankers and IB trainees brought an array of shortcomings to the table, which in tandem produced a poor battlefield product. Overall in Spain, the tank, like the Soviet armor technicians and the IB recruits, never realized the potential that Red Army and Comintern planners had envisioned. The issue was not one of either neglect nor sabotage, but basic inexperience and incompetence. But these criticisms

<sup>51</sup>The problems of training are discussed in the field report by one tank commander, Robert Gladnick. Yale RSMAC, Box 14. Cited in Zaloga, "Soviet Tank Operations," 161, n. 43.

<sup>52</sup>See the commissar report sent to Voroshilov on 22 October 1937. RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1033, ll. 174–183. Reproduced in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, p. 292.

<sup>53</sup>That direct Soviet participation in tank crews was phased out by early 1938 has long been established. See especially the work of the pro-Loyalist British correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, Henry W. Buckley; *Life and Death of the Spanish Republic* (London: H. Hamilton, 1940), p. 412. Buckley had perhaps the longest direct experience in Spain of any foreign correspondent who covered the war. He was first assigned to the country in 1929 and remained for a decade, not leaving until the end of the war in April 1939.

<sup>54</sup>Intelligence report to Voroshilov, 22 Oct. 1937. RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1033, ll. 174–183. Reproduced in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, p. 479.

of the performance of the Russian tank crews and their IB confederates are mitigated by the specific conditions imposed on the Soviets and the IB in their operations in support of the Republic. In terms of tank deployment, the greatest hindrance to victory was insufficient quantity and a continual lack of maintenance support. The International tank units performed poorly, but given the cards they were dealt, it is impossible to imagine them performing much better.

### **STALINIST TERROR AND THE INTERNATIONAL BRIGADES**

If in the area of armored warfare Soviet policies indirectly undercut the ability of IB tankers to serve effectively, elsewhere Soviet practices could be more destructive, both in IB performance and morale. The recent work of Radosh and Habeck has drawn attention to Soviet and Comintern excesses at the IB training camp at Albacete, though here again newly available archival materials document not sabotage but incompetence; and rather than evidence of Stalinist hegemony among the IB, these declassified reports betray a conspicuous lack of control and an inability to translate decrees into action. True, some Stalinist terror did enter into the culture of the IB and not a few Comintern officers displayed a ruthlessness that could only have emerged from the peculiar conditions of Moscow's ideologically rigid school of indoctrination.

On the whole, however, accounts of the extent of Soviet policies of terror within the IB have been greatly exaggerated. According to the leading expert in the field, there is no evidence that the NKVD was "more active in the International Brigades than in the rest of the army."<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, it is clear that neither the Kremlin nor Comintern possessed the logistical sophistication, much less the manpower, to carry out wholesale repression within the cadres. In this regard, it is telling that since the 1991 post-Soviet declassifications, no new documentary evidence has come to light concerning Alexander Orlov, long claimed to be the lead NKVD operative in Spain. It is odd indeed that after a decade and a half of open access in the Russian Military archive (RGVA) and other funds no researcher has to date produced any evidence of Orlov's activities during the civil war. For an agent sometimes touted as the most powerful Soviet in Spain, he left no fingerprints whatsoever.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup>Skoutelsky, "The Comintern and the International Brigades," p. 13.

<sup>56</sup>Among the eighty-one declassified documents edited by Habeck and Radosh in their recently published volume on Stalin's intervention in Spain (*Spain Betrayed*)—documents carefully selected to present an uncharitable view of Soviet participation in the war—not one discusses the activities of Orlov.

Nonetheless, documents already available remove any doubt that some of the Soviet and Comintern agents working in Spain and in particular with the IB were responsible for unpardonable offenses, targeting innocent “fascist conspirators,” who in nearly all cases were nothing of the sort, but rather unsuspecting victims whose political affiliations had been condemned by the ideological straitjacket of Stalinism. While Soviet-sponsored practices of arrest, torture, and murder should be exposed as completely as the documentation allows, one must take care not permit a finite number of excesses to form the sole basis for a broader assessment of the Soviet relations with the IB nor of Operation X. However odious some examples undoubtedly were, Soviet secret police actions in Spain, whether in the IB training camp at Albacete or elsewhere, were delimited both geographically and chronologically, confined mainly to Barcelona and its environs, the IB base, or occasionally Madrid, and occurred primarily during a few periodic bursts of frenzied activity. The very small number of Soviet agents present in Spain who would have been occupied with campaigns of ideologically motivated terror placed major restrictions on their extent and duration. Like nearly all other aspects of the Soviet intervention, the policy of terror was easy enough to conceive in the Kremlin — if indeed such a policy was ever explicitly laid out — but, in practice, even NKVD campaigns tended to be poorly supported on the ground and were only half-heartedly implemented.<sup>57</sup>

### **SOVIET HUMANITARIAN AID TO THE INTERNATIONAL BRIGADES**

If with regards to the IB during the war the Soviets were guilty at the very least of incompetence and neglect, what may be said about Moscow’s comportment following the fall of the Republic, when a refugee crisis of enormous proportions unfolded in southern France, one with real consequences for surviving members of the IB? As Franco’s army moved swiftly through Catalonia, tens of thousands of Republican fighters, brigadistas, and civilians fled across the border into French territory. The refugees clustered together in hastily constructed camps, often with no shelter from the elements and lacking adequate food, medical attention, and sanitary facilities.<sup>58</sup> The Soviet policy towards the refugees has always been obscured by the same lack of primary official materials that

<sup>57</sup>The basic lack of control between Moscow and the Comintern agents running the IB operation is the basic them of Rémi Skoutelsky, “The Comintern and the International Brigades,” in *The Volunteer*, 24 (1, March 2002): pp. 9–13.

<sup>58</sup>See Hugh G. Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. rev. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986) pp. 877–79.

characterizes all aspects of Moscow's Spanish adventure. Some of this fog has now lifted, but a full accounting of Soviet actions awaits further archival declassification in the Russian Federation.

At the end of the war, the Soviet regime came in for harsh criticism—especially from the right-wing French press—for its failure to actively support the refugees, not a few of whom were Comintern agents or volunteers sent to fight at the behest of the Kremlin. The responsibility of caring for the estimated 400,000 dislocated persons fell mainly on the host country, France, although French authorities received some support from the International Red Cross. French appeals to other states to accept small numbers of refugees or contribute to their support met with a mixed response. The Soviet and British governments initially refused to help, though, according to Arnold Toynbee, Moscow eventually contributed 28,000 pounds sterling, and London 50,000.<sup>59</sup> For their part, the French had budgeted in February 1939 some 30 million francs to deal with the refugees.

Apart from the post-war donation of the miserly sum of 28,000 pounds, the Soviets had earlier provided a more respectable sum to help alleviate the burgeoning refugee problem. Few historians have acknowledged this Soviet gift, while others have wrongly claimed that the amount was trivial.<sup>60</sup> Recently uncovered archival materials from the Archivo Histórico Nacional in Madrid now allow for a complete accounting of the affair. A 1 March 1939 letter from Marcelino Pascua (by that time the Republic's ambassador to France) to his Soviet counterpart thanks the government of the USSR for a very significant donation:

My dear ambassador:

I would like to express to you with these lines my gratitude for the gift of five million francs, destined for the Spanish refugees in France, which your government has just presented to me, the representative of the Spanish Republic. I have already alerted President Negrín of this very propitious and generous gesture by the government of the USSR, which is evidence of the Soviets' genuine sympathy for the Spanish people in this difficult time ....<sup>61</sup>

We may conclude that Moscow contributed five million francs of relief aid directly to the Republic's Paris embassy. Yet this gift was sent a month before the end of the war, when the Republic was still in existence.

<sup>59</sup> Arnold Toynbee and V.M. Boulter, *Survey of International Affairs, 1938* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), vol. II: pp. 397, 398.

<sup>60</sup> Anthony Beevor, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Peter Bedrick, 1982), p. 269. Beevor's book, though engaging and highly readable, is nonetheless not an academic study. The author cites no sources.

<sup>61</sup> Pascua to Souritz, 1 Mar. 1939, AHN-Madrid. Diversos. M. Pascua, leg. 2, exp. 14, 5–6.

With Franco's conclusive victory on 1 April, the Soviets became far less magnanimous; hence the Kremlin's reluctance to make additional contributions to the refugee cause later in the spring. It appears that the Soviet government felt a certain obligation to the Spanish Republic and remaining international fighters up to the end of the war, but once the cause was finally lost, the Soviet leadership found no further justification for continued expenditures. It cannot be doubted that the Soviets' rocky relations with France throughout the war—not least in early 1939, when the Paris government may have prevented Soviet arms from reaching the desperate Republic<sup>62</sup>—made them more willing to abandon France to confront a refugee crisis for which the Kremlin held the French partially responsible.

This new evidence may appear to absolve the Soviet regime from the accusation of having abandoned the IB refugees during the Republic's final death throes. Yet the issue of humanitarian assistance is not completely resolved. There remains the problem of the resettlement of those refugees whose close association with the communists had made them unwanted throughout much of Europe. In early February 1939, the Soviet government had come out in bitter opposition to France's initial unwillingness to grant asylum to the scores of political refugees appealing for assistance. "At the point of a sword," *Pravda* piously declared, "they turn away children, women, the old and the infirm. Never has such a disgraceful spectacle been witnessed."<sup>63</sup> An examination of Moscow's actions, however, reveals that the Kremlin was hardly in a position to point fingers.

At the end of the war, many exiles had appealed to the USSR to take them in, naïvely believing that the Soviets would match the words of their long-running propaganda campaign of solidarity with swift action. Thousands of those languishing in French camps were *brigadistas* who had answered the call to arms from Communist party cells around the world. Many were Communist exiles from Western Europe who had first received asylum in the USSR between 1933 and 1936, and were later dispatched by the Comintern to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Some of the injured Communist *brigadistas* had attempted as early as summer 1937 to be evacuated to the USSR, usually with no success.<sup>64</sup> Later, in October 1938, when the International Brigades were officially withdrawn,

<sup>62</sup>Ivan Maiskii, "Natsional'no-revolutsionnaia voina spanskogo naroda i Sovetskii Soiuz," *Pod znamenem Ispanskoi respubliki* (Moscow: Nauka, 1965) p. 57. The dispute over France's alleged refusal in early 1939 to allow Soviet arms into the Republic will be discussed below.

<sup>63</sup>*Pravda*, 2 Feb. 1939.

<sup>64</sup>A report from a Comintern agent in Valencia to Dimitrov claimed that "[t]here still remain a large number of wounded or physically sick volunteers who are demanding that they be sent to the USSR." RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 1015, ll. 92–113. Cited in Mary Habeck and Ronald Radosh, *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 233.

Comintern Secretary Dimitrov had tried valiantly to win asylum for hundreds of the same exiles. In a letter dated 3 December 1938, Dimitrov explained to a Party representative the Soviet connection to many of the officers working for the Republican army:

With regard to events in Spain, we sent 589 fraternal members of the CP, who had emigrated at an earlier time due to political motives. The majority of these worked in the capacity of commanders and political commissars in the IB. Part of these comrades perished in battle while a minority, with heavy injuries and sicknesses, will return to the USSR. At the present time there are 466 commanders. Of these, 203 have family in the USSR, while 115 have Soviet citizenship.

Together with the evacuation of the volunteers from Spain, 290 men cannot return to their own country because they would await death there or many years of imprisonment. Aside from that they have injuries, or are now invalids and due to their physical condition require constant care.

The secretary of the IKKI requests that some 300 of these men be admitted to the USSR.<sup>65</sup>

A Politburo meeting in February 1939 had resulted in the recommendation that local Communist parties in Western countries deal with the displaced International Brigade volunteers. Though this order emanated from the very center of Soviet power, the Politburo would permit only a limited number of exiles into the USSR itself. In late February, the Comintern produced a list of 242 Communist commanders and their dependents who were to be given documents of transit for the Soviet Union.<sup>66</sup> But many times that number were effectively abandoned by Moscow. The contradictory nature of this policy was the object of scorn and criticism not only in the West, but even within the highest circles of the Comintern leadership. In a letter of 26 August 1939 to Stalin 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 6011 former IB volunteers, out of whom 4697 are emigrants from

<sup>65</sup>RGASPI, f. 495, op. 76, d. 22, l. 3. Opus 76 is the archive of the Dimitrov Secretariat.

<sup>66</sup>RGASPI, f. 495, op. 76, d. 22, ll. 22–34.

states where communists have been driven underground. The nationalities of these 4697 people are split among the following:

German	736
Austrian	483
Sudeten German	107
Subtotal	1325
Polish	950
Italian	872
Czech	483
Yugoslav	372
Hungarian	163
Romanian	160
Bulgarian	141
Croatian	81
Latvian	47
Brazilian	34
Lithuanian	27
Greek	25
Estonian	17
Total	4697

The majority of this group of people consists of workers, communists, and active members of communist parties. The Polish group of 950 people is comprised of emigrant workers who entered France to join the IB.

Earlier, the question was placed before the Politburo—which has worked on it since February—whether through communist parties, workers organizations, and aid committees for Spain, these former volunteers might secure accommodation in capitalist countries. As a result of extensive efforts, from February to May of this year 2374 people were successfully transferred to countries with legal workers movements, including the USA, England, Belgium, and Canada. In all probability, approximately 800 other IB members will be liberated legally into France.

Nevertheless, there remains a group of approximately 3500 people whom no bourgeois government wishes to receive. Winter is now approaching. The prisoners do not even have barracks and live under open skies. The French bourgeoisie is deliberately supporting the physical destruction of these comrades. 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 favor. Won't you allow into the USSR 3000–3500 former fighters of the IB, [provided they are] subjected 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. Manuilskii<sup>67</sup>

This document confirms the accusations of three generations of anti-Soviet writers who have accused Stalin of abandoning the men he had earlier sent to fight with the Spanish Republicans. The letter hints at what may have been a significant level of dissent between the Comintern leadership and the Soviet dictator. With their very emotional case to admit the former International Brigade fighters to the USSR, Dimitrov and Manuilskii emerge as surprisingly concerned, and Stalin all the more cold and heartless. Let us recall that this was not a rhetorical speech to the Comintern Congress, but a personal letter to the Soviet leader marked *sovershenno sekretno* ("top secret")—a letter which openly credits Western states with doing more to help loyal communists than the Soviet Union.

It is clear that the creation and sustenance of the IB was part of Stalin's wide-ranging project for linking the Loyalist cause with that of the Soviet Union and international communism, a component of a larger geo-strategic gamble which sought to create united opposition to the fascist menace, one which might eventually bring Moscow and the West into a closer alliance. That this ambitious effort failed is demonstrated not only with the dissolution of the exhausted IB in autumn 1938, and the contemporaneous flight from Spain of the remaining Red Army advisors and technicians in advance of the Republic's defeat, but with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet alliance just months after the civil war ended in 1939.

<sup>67</sup>RGASPI, f. 495, op. 76, d. 22, ll. 36–39. Those documents thus far declassified indicate no response to this letter from Stalin. In any case, after August 1939 there is no record of the Soviets taking any measures to evacuate Comintern personnel stranded in southern France.

The ultimate failure of the IB, like the Red Army's parallel Operation X, was due to three separate factors: proximity, time and experience. From a distance of 3,500 kilometers, the Comintern and Kremlin's ability to control events on the ground in Spain was always severely limited. The lack of reliable communication lines meant that directives from the center were delayed on arrival, and Moscow was often in the dark on whether any given initiative had succeeded or failed. Time also doomed the operation, for it was neither on the side of the Republic nor Stalin. Despite his best efforts to seize the opportunity presented in Spain, Stalin had bet on a losing horse, and the adventure was revealed by summer 1937 as one that would ultimately fail. Finally, and perhaps most critically, the Soviets and the Comintern possessed in the late-1930s none of the requisite experience or expertise required for major overseas operations. Between their poor understanding of Republican politics, an even weaker facility with the Spanish language, to say nothing of chronic shortages of equipment and a widening technology gap with Nazi Germany, the exponents of Soviet and Comintern policy on the ground in Spain were ill-equipped to carry out Moscow ambitious yet unattainable objectives.

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