

3. A Neutral Variation and Some Consequences

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The Spanish Division

The immediate origin of the Spanish "Blue Division" also dates from the opening of the German offensive against the USSR on 22 June 1941. On the previous day, Germany's Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, had directed his ambassadors and emissaries in twelve friendly countries to read the German declaration of war against the Soviet Union to the respective foreign ministers and report the mood in which the declaration was received. From Madrid came a very positive response, with Ambassador Eberhard von Stohrer indicating that the Spanish Foreign Minister, Ramón Serrano Suñer, had voiced his appreciation for the notice. After consulting with Generalissimo Francisco Franco, he told the German ambassador that the Spanish Government welcomed the beginning of the fight against Communism and that Germany's action would prove popular throughout Spain. Stohrer mentioned that Serrano

... was asking the German Government to permit at once a few volunteer formations of the *Falange* to participate in the fight against the common foe, in memory of Germany's fraternal assistance during the Civil War. This gesture of solidarity was, of course, being made independently of the full and complete entry of Spain into the war beside the Axis, which would take place at the appropriate moment. ¹

Two days later, von Ribbentrop wired Stohrer that the German government would gladly accept the offer of *Falange* volunteers. ² Undoubtedly, the German Foreign Office was highly pleased with such a response to the beginning of the Russo-German War, for Franco's Spain had proved to be a difficult friend ever since the Anti-Comintern Pact, of which Spain was a member, had been distorted by the 1939 Russo-German Non-aggression Pact.

Although Spain never entered the Second World War, it approached that possibility repeatedly on its own terms, and steered far from strict neutrality. Franco would not enter the war for free, however, and maintained a high price for Spanish participation in the Axis Alliance. The greatest temptation for the Generalissimo came with the fall of France following the summer of 1940. The prospect of acquiring French holdings in Africa and the possibility of an early German peace with Britain brought Franco to the bargaining table. Hitler, who exercised the real choice in the matter, would not meet Spanish demands. Astoundingly, Franco kept toying with the prospect through the end of 1942. Spain had been weakened by the devastation of the Spanish Civil War and by shortages of critical food and fuel; for both of these, Spain depended upon trade with the United States and Britain. Despite the continual urgings of his Germanophile Foreign Minister, Serrano, Franco opted to preserve technical neutrality. He agreed to German requests for naval provisioning in Spain and the Canary Islands, and planned joint operations against Gibraltar with the Germans, as well as cooperation in economic matters and intelligence assistance. Whenever he considered a formal declaration of war, however, it was on the basis of Germany meeting his own totally unrealistic demands for huge quantities of arms, food, and fuel, along with territorial expansion in North Africa at the expense of Vichy France. ³

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Serrano Suñer's offer of military assistance in the war against Russia rekindled Hitler's hopes of gaining Spain's entry into the war on Germany's terms, and this wishful prospect of Spanish aid would remain a significant political consideration for both countries through the Second World War. But Serrano's words had been disingenuous, for Franco had no

apparent notion of owing a debt to the Germans for the assistance they had rendered during the Spanish Civil War. His sympathies for the German cause and offers to enter the war were not rewarded by promises of colonial expansion in North Africa. Thus, the offer of a Spanish volunteer unit, which Serrano had discussed openly in Spain before the Russo-German War began, simply represented part of Franco's continuing businesslike manner toward Hitler. It would form a substantial gesture for future exploitation with the Third Reich, yet would not immediately imperil relations with Britain and the United States. Franco's policy of maximum profit with minimum risk in the Second World War remained virtually unchanged after the crucial negotiations with Germany in late 1940 had collapsed.

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The decision to send a full division of volunteers was reached the next day in a meeting of the Spanish Council of Ministers. The size of unit to be sent was probably determined by the need for a degree of self-sufficiency in a truly distant theater of operation. Because the army would not allow the *Falange* party to supercede it in any military expedition, it determined that the officers would be drawn from the regular forces, and only a few militia officers of junior grade were allowed to volunteer. The lower ranks were filled with Civil War veterans, regular soldiers, and *Falange*-inspired youth. This volunteer effort was immensely popular in Spain, and large numbers of volunteers had to be turned away or deferred until the later replacement and rotation program was instituted. In several units, regular army officers volunteered as ordinary soldiers upon finding the



leadership billets already filled. German reports describing that about forty times the required number of men had volunteered may well have been valid judgments in some cities, but not in former strongholds of the Spanish Republic, like Barcelona. The main reason for this response was the appeal of an anti-Communist crusade (the term invoked for the Civil War) combined with the popular expectations of a quick victory by the

Germans. 5

The Council of Ministers selected [Augustín Muñoz Grandes](#) to command the division. He was then a major general, serving as military governor of the sensitive Gibraltar region and as commander of the 22nd Infantry Division. His selection reflected the joint political and military character of the Volunteer Division, which would remain evident throughout its existence. Muñoz Grandes had served with distinction, like Franco, as a young officer in Morocco and had gained the recognition of General Primo de Rivera. Finishing the Civil War as a corps commander in Cataluña, he became Secretary General of the *Falange* on 9 August 1939, a post he held for six months. He was therefore a man likely to be acceptable to both the Army and *Falange* elements of the Division, as well as to the Germans, since his pro-Axis sentiments were well known. 6

The organization and assembly of the division, already popularly christened the "Blue Division" after the blue *Falange* shirt that formed part of their paramilitary uniforms, was accomplished in the remarkably short time of twenty days. This can be taken as an indication of the eagerness of the Spanish to be present operationally for the impending "collapse" of the Soviet state. Despite German assumptions that the division would be organized on their own system, the actual formation reflected German practices only in principle. Either through Spanish misinterpretation of data furnished by the German Embassy in Madrid or from a desire to incorporate a larger number of volunteers in order to meet imagined exigencies of combat in Russia, the usual triangular divisional organization (i.e., three regiments, each of three battalions) swelled to include a fourth infantry regiment of "fixed reserves" and an additional battalion of "mobile reserves." The major components of the division thus totaled one artillery and four infantry regiments, with separate support battalions of reserve infantry, engineer, reconnaissance, anti-tank, communication, and service troops. The various units were recruited in particular geographic regions of Spain and initially took the names of their respective commanders. 7

The Spanish Air Force also decided to send a volunteer air unit of experienced fighter pilots, most of whom had fought in the Civil War. This unit later became known to the Allies as the "Blue Squadron" or the "Salvador Squadron," but actually there were to be five squadrons formed, serving one after another as the Spanish Volunteer Squadron. The first such squadron was commanded by Major Angel Salas Larrazábal. [8](#)

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The army designated Irún on the French border as the assembly area of the Blue Division. In each major Spanish city, parades, reviews, and religious ceremonies highlighted the assembly and departure of the various local contingents. Some basic military indoctrination and training marches took place during the first week, but no equipment other than uniforms was issued at this time to volunteers. The main farewell ceremony took place on 13 July at Madrid's northern train station. Army Minister General José Varela and Serrano Suñer attended the departure of the first of the  Spanish Blue Division infantry units, the leading battalions of the Rodrigo Regiment. Meanwhile, advance liaison groups had flown to Germany as early as 5 July, and on the 14th General Muñoz Grandes flew to Berlin with his personal command group. The first troop trains crossed the border into France on 15 July, and arrived at Grafenwöhr training camp on 18 July. [9](#)

During their stay of slightly over one month at Grafenwöhr, the Spanish contingent reorganized, trained, and received Germany Army equipment. The Spanish division was restructured to conform to the normal German infantry table of organization. German units were formed on a "triangular" rather than "square" structure, with three infantry regiments to a division, three battalions to a regiment and so forth. The personnel of the Rodrigo Regiment were redistributed, and the other three received German Army numerical designations. As the single volunteer division in the German Army to form with native leadership, this division also had the distinction of having the German division commander's authority for courts-martial conferred upon its commander, hitherto reserved only for German citizens. The Blue Division now entered German service as the 250th (Spanish) Infantry Division, with a total strength on paper of 11,046 officers and men. [10](#)

The only marked departure from the German model was the reserve battalion, which would reinforce any regiment heavily committed in either attack or defense. The Spaniards had expected that their division would be organized as a mechanized unit suited for the fullest rigors of modern warfare in the Russian steppes. They had therefore recruited a large number of mechanically talented men in anticipation of just that. To their chagrin, the Germans issued them 5750 horses and only 928 motor vehicles. [11](#) To make matters worse, the horses were for the most part infirm Balkan animals that were only marginally tamed. The need for proper handling and care for these animals would plague the division, since a large number of the former university students and city dwellers who had volunteered had never laid eyes on such animals! The reason for this situation was patently simple, though, since mechanized forces formed only a small, elite nucleus of the largely horse-drawn German Army. In fact, the only wholly motorized units in infantry divisions organized like the 250th were the regimental anti-tank companies and the divisional anti-tank battalion. Like many of the lower echelon German infantry divisions, the Spanish Division was largely equipped with a variety of obsolete but still serviceable items.



The anti-tank guns, for example, were the prewar 37-mm type that would prove to be only marginally effective against the latest Soviet tanks. Motor transport for the Division ranged from standard issue bicycles to three-ton trucks. The Germans issued to the motorized anti-tank units a most curious assortment of ex-civilian Renault, Peugeot, and Hudson Terraplane automobiles fitted to tow the 37-mm guns and in some cases equipped with radio mounts. [12](#)

The Spanish officers and men could hardly afford to take time out for brooding about material deficiencies, since precious little time remained for training their heterogeneous unit into a cohesive organization. The Spanish Army officers remained particularly hostile toward the many Falangist volunteers who had held party leadership positions in Spain and appeared ill-suited to the hard life of a Spanish enlisted man. On the other hand, many of these political soldiers had enlisted on the assumption that such service would improve their status in the party upon their return. Faced with hostility on the part of the regular officers, they felt betrayed and often complained to visiting dignitaries of unfair treatment.



The immense problems of creating a workable team from a broad mixture of military, political, university, and peasant types, and at the same time training the respective combat arms and services in the characteristics and use of their equipment in the space of a single month appear, to this day, to have been an unreasonable undertaking. The youth of the volunteers was of some advantage in overcoming the constraints of time. Under a vigorous training program, the Spaniards eagerly learned to manipulate guns, howitzers, mortars, and machine guns. They often surprised their German mentors with their rapid gun drill, accompanied by much shouting and scrambling, as opposed to the brief, efficient and "by the numbers" German norm. However, the training of a seasoned body of infantrymen and exercising of the larger tactical units remained impossible in the short period at hand. ¹³



The pilots of the First Spanish Volunteer Squadron flew to Tempelhof (Berlin) Airfield under the command of Major Salas. The Spanish contingent then moved to the Werneuchen Fighter School, eighteen miles outside of Berlin, to begin refresher training on the Messerschmitt BF-109E aircraft and the latest German air tactics. They completed their training on 28 August. The squadron consisted of an air echelon of seventeen pilots with mechanics and radio technicians, and a ground echelon with the remainder of the twenty-three officers and eighty men. ¹⁴



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August brought the last hurried stages of preparation for the Blue Division at Grafenwöhr. Evaluation of the combat training the Spanish received can only be cast in the light of the latter experiences of the Division in Russia. In retrospect, it seems clear that the German Army either did not realize the complexity of the training needs of this initially heterogeneous mixture of individuals or simply ignored all such indicators in the interest of forwarding another division to the replacement-starved army groups of the Eastern Front. Thus, after scarcely a month of existence as a unified division, the Spaniards of the German Army departed between 20 and 23 August for the front. ¹⁵

When the Ninth Army of Colonel General Adolf Strauss received the message that it would receive the new Spanish Division, the staff noted in the headquarters war journal that, hopefully, the Spaniards would ease the threatening situation the army had encountered east of Toropets. However, they also observed that, at normal rates of marching, the Division would not reach that city until 8 October at the earliest. ¹⁶

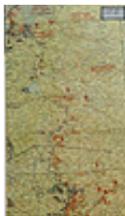


As the Spaniards marched eastward, the situation changed drastically for Army Group Center with the completion of the tasks assigned to its armored forces in the Leningrad and Kiev encirclement operations. Hitler issued his Directive No. 35 on 6 September, which called for a radical shift of most of the available armored unit strength to Army Group Center and set a deadline for the end of September for beginning Operation Typhoon: the seizure of Moscow. As the German mechanized forces were shifted and realigned,



the suddenly weakened Army Group North of Field Marshal Ritter von Leeb found itself at an immediate disadvantage. A sharp Russian attack on 24 September against the Eighteenth Army caused the Germans to give up some ground on the east bank of the Neva River. At the same time, German intelligence revealed a Soviet buildup on the east side of the Volkhov River and the Valdai Hills to the south which, they feared, could threaten the thinly-held junction of the Sixteenth and Eighteenth Armies. ¹⁷ Colonel General Franz Halder recounted the events of 24 September as a crisis in the German Army High Command (OKH).

To buttress von Leeb's army group, Hitler directed the cancellation of the transfer of one of Leeb's motorized divisions that had been scheduled to go to Army Group Center, and ordered the immediate transfer by air of anti-tank mines, two parachute regiments from reserves, and an infantry regiment from Army Group Center. This proved totally beyond the German air transport capabilities, and as a result OKH ordered Army Group Center to give up a complete infantry division, which was sent forward by rail. The Spanish Division was picked for this assignment, probably because it was just approaching the key rail center of Vitebsk. ¹⁸



The Spanish command drew up infantry regiments on line to occupy the Volkhov river front from Lobkovo south through Novgorod, and along the shores of Lake Ilmen to the mouth of the Veryazha River (a forty-mile frontage) using, from north to south, the 269th and 262nd Regiments and a mixed group of reconnaissance, anti-tank, and other smaller units. With this, the Blue Division of Spain became the largest foreign volunteer unit to be deployed in combat by the Wehrmacht. ¹⁹

The arrival of the Spanish Division and other reinforcements to Army Group North now permitted that command to plan a limited offensive with the triple objective of tightening its stranglehold on Leningrad, linking with the Finnish Army in eastern Karelia, and diverting Soviet resources from the major effort of Operation Typhoon, the seizure of Moscow. The last mechanized group controlled by Army Group North, the XXXIX Corps, was staged at Chudovo for the thrust along the single railroad line to Tikhvin. To cover the flanks of this operation and expand the bridgehead over the Volkhov, two corps of infantry would be employed, of which the southern one, designated Group "von Roques" on 11 October, included the Spanish Division and its neighbors to the north, the 126th Infantry and 18th Motorized Divisions.

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The Sixteenth Army issued its operation order on 10 October, just as the Spaniards were occupying their new positions. According to the order, the Spaniards were expected to attack with two regiments frontally across the Volkhov River from Novgorod to seize the towns of Kostova and Bozhenka and consolidate a bridgehead at Msta over the river of the same name. This represented a most ambitious undertaking, even for a full-strength division. Two days later, the Germans revised their plan and designated a more limited objective of covering the right flank of the 18th Motorized Division as it advanced along the Shevelevo-Posad road toward the Msta River. ²⁰

The 269th Regiment of Colonel José Martínez Esparza executed the first Spanish attack in Russia with assault battalions massed between Udarnik and Kotovitzky. Reconnaissance patrols crossed the river on 17 and 18 October to test Russian defenses and were driven back by a sharp Russian spoiling attack on the second day. On the following day, the 2nd Battalion (II/269th) followed and linked with elements of the 18th Motorized Division, which had crossed easily at Kuzino. Pivoting to the south, the Spanish battalions took Russa and Sitno on 21 and 22 October after hard fighting. The Germans had meanwhile thrown pontoon bridges across the Volkhov at Udarnik, and the III/263rd Battalion and 250th

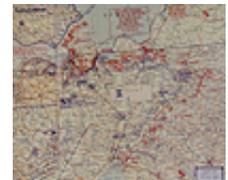
Reserve Battalion joined the battalions of the 269th in the assault. On 23 October, the Russians unsuccessfully counterattacked Sitno in regimental strength, and repeated their assaults four days later. In each attack, the Russian forces left hundreds of dead on the battlefield. The Spanish took hundreds of prisoners, indicating the very low state of Russian morale at this point in the campaign. Tigoda and Nikitkino fell on the 28th and 29th to the III/263rd, but the 250th Reserve Battalion met heavier resistance near the river and was repulsed from Muravi. Meanwhile, on the Spanish left flank, the German motorized infantry captured Ottenski and Posad against light opposition. Colonel Martinez Esparza sent a company-sized patrol eastward to link with the Germans. When this was accomplished, the captain in command returned from Ottenski reporting that the extremely rough terrain and dense woods left only the Shevelvo-Posad road as an effective communications route. ²¹ Meanwhile, the XXXIX Corps struggled to the northeast against stiff Russian resistance, losing much armor in the mud on the way. A final thrust over the last six miles to seize Tikhvin succeeded on 8 November, but the troops were already at the point of exhaustion. The 18th Motorized Division was therefore ordered up from the right flank on the same day, and the Spaniards relieved the 30th Regiment of that division at Ottenski and Posad. The I/269th and the 11th Company of III/269th, which had made the earlier reconnaissance, entrenched there in the face of growing enemy pressure.



The Spanish companies of this garrison had suffered heavily in the earlier phase of the Volkhov battle, and averaged only about fifty men each. Three anti-tank guns and two captured Russian 122-mm guns augmented the infantry strength of the two strongpoints. Fierce Russian attacks drove in Spanish outposts and cut the road between Posad and Ottenski on 12 November. Major Tomás García Rebull, a staff officer of the 262nd Regiment, took a relief column of infantrymen and anti-tank guns and forced through scattered Russian patrols to clear the road.

That night, the Russians returned to the attack with several battalions and heavy air and artillery support, cutting all communication with the embattled Posad defenders, who were threatened with complete annihilation. General Muñoz Grandes threw his available reserves to this critical sector. He ordered the II/269th Battalion to attack south from Ottenski and concentrated his last available units at Shevelevo: one company each of the 262nd and 263rd regiments, and one other created from clerks, technicians, and bandsmen of the division headquarters. On 15 November, the relief forces reached Posad to find their shattered comrades of the I/269th Battalion. Positions were held by only four or five men in some sectors, surrounded by heaps of Russian corpses and dead Spanish comrades. Major García Rebull was the senior survivor of the Posad garrison and succeeded to the command of the relief unit, made up of the 2nd Company, I/261, the 7th Company, II/262, and the 3rd Company of the Engineer Battalion, which possessed anti-tank guns and mortars. The II/269th Battalion returned to Ottenski, with the 180 survivors of the I/269th continuing on to Shevelevo for well-deserved rest and reorganization. The Spanish outposts settled down to a static defense through the remainder of the month. ²²

Starting on 4 December, the Spanish lines received heavy Russian infantry assaults with strong air and artillery support. The I/269th remnants at Shevelevo returned again to Ottenski to shore up the vulnerable salient of the Spanish lines. The III/263rd alone suffered 190 casualties in the Nikitkino area during the next four days. But the stiffest fighting again involved Major García Rebull's men at Posad. In bitter cold—minus thirty-eight degrees Celcius—the Spaniards defended in place with small arms, shovels, and axes, repeatedly repelling desperate Soviet assaults. On the 7th the Spaniards were ordered by XXXVIII Corps to withdraw, and they destroyed all their immovable equipment, including six guns, and evacuated Posad and Ottenski during



the night of 7-8 December. On the 9th, XXXIX Corps evacuated Tikhvin and, after extensive pleading on the part of von Leeb, Hitler allowed Army Group North to begin the wholesale withdrawal behind the Volkhov line during the period 15-24 December. All Spanish units re-crossed the frozen Volkhov by 10 December and occupied their former sector without incident through 24 December. [23](#)



According to Spanish sources, 566 men of the Blue Division died during the course of the Volkhov-Tikhvin offensive. The mission of flank protection had been accomplished, but the action left an indelible mark upon the Spaniards as to the strength of the Soviet air and artillery power, a respect that would last through the whole campaign. [24](#)

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The Soviet forces on the Volkhov Front attempted to pursue the retreating German and Spanish units across the river, but were generally too weak. The most critical threat developing in the Spanish sector through the New Year took the form of a three-regiment attack on the thinly-held northern sector on 27 December. Russian shock troops crossed the ice at 2:30 A.M., hit the Spanish outposts, and seized a salient between Udarnik and Lobkovo. Local Spanish reinforcements held the Russians at bay until that afternoon, when Major García Rebull counterattacked with two companies of the I/269th Battalion and retook the Volkhov bank, isolating the enemy remaining on the west side of the river. The Spanish claimed 1080 Russians killed in this action. That night the Spanish units were relieved by the German 424th Regiment of the 126th Infantry Division as far south as Kottovitsy. The Spanish Division in effect shifted southward to cover the Lake Ilmen sector with stronger forces. Frozen to a depth of three feet or more, the lake had become a serious problem as Soviet patrols and partisans made extensive use of it as a communications route. The Division also had difficulty in covering its old sector with adequate strength, because of the heavy losses it had suffered in the earlier offensive. [25](#)



The Spanish Division had regularly sustained high casualties in continuous fighting on the Volkhov front. Observing that their casualties were on the order of three thousand in the first four months of combat, the Army Group North staff began to worry about restoring the strength of the Spanish Division. The replacement system ultimately devised by the Spanish Army High Command was to continue recruitment for the Volunteer Division and periodically forward "marching battalions," numbering 800-1000 men, to the Russian front, via Grafenwöhr. As the ranks of the Division filled out, veterans would be sent home in similar returning units of about 500 men each. In this way, over 36,000 Spaniards ultimately served with the Blue Division in the Russo-German conflict. The first such marching battalion of 44 officers and 719 men reached the Division during February 1942.

[26](#) The part that the Blue Division was to play in the battle of the Volkhov Pocket was, contrary to later Spanish claims, rather limited in scope. The XXXVII Corps assumed control of the southern flank of the pocket and used the 58th Division as its primary assault unit. The weaker Spanish and 126th Divisions were used to support the flanks of the 58th Division in its northern thrust and to supply additional artillery support. Other units that came under eventual control of the Corps—285th Security Division, Second SS Infantry Brigade, and Group "Jaschke" (part of the 20th Motorized Division)—cordoned the southern and southwestern flanks of the Second Shock Army and prevented its further advance.



The first immediate action the Spanish Division took was to extend its lines north to relieve some units of the hard-pressed 126th Division. Then, over the next five months, artillery and infantry battalions of the Spanish Division were attached to or placed in direct support of other German units engaged in surrounding and liquidating the Russian forces in the Volkhov Pocket. [27](#)

In the first four months of 1942, as many as three Spanish infantry battalions and five batteries of artillery were simultaneously on loan to the 58th and 126th Divisions, but the only significant offensive action took place on 12 and 13 February when the I/269th and the 9th Company of the II/263rd joined a combat group of the 126th Division in thrusting north from Ossiya to Bolshoy Zamoshye to relieve a company of the 285th Security Division that had been cut off in the initial Russian advance. [28](#)

Four months later, as the general mop-up of the pocket commenced, Battle Group "Burk" formed to sweep through the same swampy, forested region. In a battle lasting nine days (21-28 June), Spanish troops of the III/262nd, the 250th Reconnaissance Battalion, and one company each of the Spanish Division's engineer and anti-tank battalions advanced in concert with German and Flemish units over six miles from Ossiya to seize Maoloye Zamoshye and destroy remnants of the Russian forces. This battle, where the Spanish soldiers received their first taste of intensive forest fighting and forever recalled it as the "green inferno," cost the Spanish Division about 270 casualties, making it their most costly single undertaking thus far in 1942. The Spanish units returned to division control at the end of June, but mopping up by German units continued in the former pocket area through July. The rest of the summer of 1942 was spent in relative quiet on the banks of the Volkhov. [29](#)



The Spanish Blue Division was not destined to complete a full year on the Volkhov River. The OKW had directed General Erich von Manstein's Eleventh Army, which had just completed the storming of the Sevastopol, to transfer its command groups, siege artillery, and four divisions to the south Leningrad sector for the implementation of Operation Northern Light: the seizure of Leningrad. Army Group North allocated seven of its own divisions, including the Spanish Division, to the Eleventh Army for the Leningrad assault, which would begin on 14 September and be completed in a matter of weeks. [30](#)

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General Muñoz Grandes received his orders on 1 August 1942 to transfer the Spanish Division to an assembly area northeast of Vyritsa. This move took place from 16 to 30 August, upon relief by the German 20th Motorized Division. The Eleventh Army then moved the Spaniards to the sector Pushkin-Krasny Bor, relieving the German 121st Infantry Division from 4 to 7 September in the LIV Corps zone of operations. The Spaniards received numerous heavy weapons that were left in the positions prepared by the 121st Division. The 250th Artillery Regiment took possession of the three 220-mm mortars and three 155-mm howitzers, both weapons of French make. The infantry regiments received an assortment of captured Russian anti-tank guns, six 76.2-mm and four 45-mm guns in all. The Spanish troops did not imagine at the time, though, how important these acquisitions would become. In the division rear, the German 138th Artillery Command deployed a large collection of siege guns, ranging from 155-mm to 370-mm, which were to be used in support of Operation Northern Light. [31](#)



Throughout the Leningrad campaign of Army Group North, however, the Russians had a habit of upsetting the most detailed German plans. The final storming of Leningrad was forestalled and ultimately cancelled by the new Soviet offensive of 27 August-2 October, in which the Russians broke through the Eighteenth Army's lines from east and west to attempt a junction at Mga and isolate the German forces in the Lake Ladoga sector. General von Manstein committed his best divisions and used up much of his ammunition in defeating these thrusts. By the time he managed to stabilize his front, there remained little question of mustering the strength necessary to carry out the planned Leningrad offensive. Manstein and his staff thereupon transferred south to establish Army Group Don, and General George Lindemann's Eighteenth Army assumed control of the Leningrad area. [32](#)

Spanish troops settled down to their by now familiar routine of positional warfare in their new location. Replacements continued to arrive from Spain, and only patrol actions and the ever-present Soviet artillery fire exacted a few casualties. At the same time, however, events in Spain took place that became of significant importance to the men of the Blue Division.



In a shakeup of his government on 3 September 1942, Franco dismissed Serrano Suñer and General Varela as Foreign Minister and Army Minister, respectively. Serrano also lost his position as President of the *Falange* Political Council, and became thereafter a political nonentity. In their stead, the Generalissimo appointed Lieutenant General Count Francisco Jordana—an Anglophile—as Foreign Minister, and General Carlos Asensio became the new Army Minister. Asensio was generally regarded as a pro-Axis officer and thus, on the surface at least, Franco had preserved the "neutral" balance of his government. But Serrano had been the chief protagonist in the commitment of the Blue Division to the German cause, and Count Jordana was well known as being opposed not only to the Division, but also highly suspicious of the popular General Muñoz Grandes, whose pro-German character he regarded as highly dangerous. [33](#)



Despite German wishes to the contrary, [Brigadier General Emilio Esteban-Infantes](#) was sent to the Blue Division as its new commander. An officer of the General Staff, Esteban-Infantes had previously headed the replacement organization for the Division in Spain. Muñoz Grandes was not willing to step down as the division commander for reasons of personal prestige and because he wished to participate in the planned attack on Leningrad. He had no wish to embarrass Esteban-Infantes, so upon the latter's arrival at the Volkhov position in August of 1942, he made him the Blue Division's deputy commander. The Spanish High Command finally exerted its will and compelled Muñoz Grandes to return on 12 December to a new assignment in the Army Ministry. [34](#)



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The end of 1942 saw the Spanish Division secure in its lines at Pushkin-Krasny Bor, but there existed increasing indications all along the Eighteenth Army front that a Soviet offensive was in the offing. The Spanish sector boasted no natural terrain features, such as rivers or high ground, to assist defensive preparations. The 11.5 miles of front was occupied by all three regiments, leaving few units for use as reserves. Early January brought the First Ladoga Battle, in which the Soviet forces finally succeeded in breaking the Leningrad siege by driving from both the Leningrad and Volkhov fronts to a meeting point north of Mga, isolating the German forces on the shores of Lake Ladoga. In furious fighting, the trapped Germans broke through to Mga and succeeded in stabilizing a new front by early February. During this time, the L Corps took over operational control of the Spanish Division, on 22 January. [35](#)



Army Group North noted the possibility of a Soviet attack from the Kolpino area on 6 February, but probably felt that the momentarily-stabilized Mga area remained more critical and, in any event, the 4th SS Police Division was reforming several miles southeast of Krasny Bor, where it was expected to be able to give some support. [36](#)

On 10 February 1943, the Spanish Blue Division met its most severe test in what turned out to be a veritable struggle for existence. An extremely heavy artillery and rocket barrage rained down upon the Spanish positions, starting at 6:45 A.M. Then the Russian infantrymen of three rifle divisions, spearheaded by over one hundred tanks, poured down the frozen corridor between the east bank of the Izhora and the October Railway.

The 37-mm guns of the Spanish anti-tank battalion were utterly



ineffectual against the Soviet armor and were quickly overrun. The I/262nd Battalion was rolled back to the southeast, and the II/262nd and 250th Reserve Battalions bore the brunt of the Russian assault, between Krasny Bor and the Izhora River. The powerful Russian attack shattered these two battalions, with the exception of a couple of platoon-sized strongpoints. By 1:00 P.M., the Russian assault had begun to reach the nearest Spanish artillery batteries, which blew up their guns to prevent their capture. The second line of Spanish reserve troops around Krasny Bor had counterattacked valiantly but were simply outweighed from the beginning. Conspicuous acts of bravery slowed the Soviet attack. Captain Manuel Huidobro Auzunema, commanding the machine-gun company positioned behind the II/262nd Battalion, personally led his counterattack and called for artillery fire on his own position to assist in the destruction of Russian forces. Though he was able to stop the Russians on his right flank, his left flank collapsed after sustaining seventy-five percent losses, and the gallant commander was killed during the subsequent hand-to-hand fighting. Nearby, soldier Antonio Ponte saved comrades from his engineer company by seizing an anti-tank mine and throwing himself upon a Russian tank that had broken into their position. Both man and tank were destroyed in the resulting explosion. Such acts of heroism among the isolated strongpoints of the Spanish position were crucial in stemming the initial onrush of Russian troops. 37



By 3:00 P.M., when communications were lost between the Spanish Division and its right flank neighbors, the first German reinforcements had rushed into the battle area.



The L Corps had sent three 75-mm anti-tank guns of the Norwegian Legion to the Spaniards and all of its available reserves to shore up the eastern flank of Krasny Bor, including a regiment of the SS Police Division and elements of the 390th Infantry Regiment (215th Division). The Eighteenth Army sent in Tiger tanks, assault guns, anti-tank guns, the 85th Mountain Regiment (4th Mountain Division), and the Army Engineer School troops. The Spanish Division moved all the troops it could spare from its left flank to the Izhora to hold the west flank of the penetration area, but Army Group North despaired of closing the gap between the Izhora and the October Railway. To this end, they released the 212th and 24th Infantry Divisions from other assignments and sent them to the south and southeast, respectively, of Krasny Bor. This quick reaction on the part of the German command ultimately prevented a major Soviet breakthrough, as the regiments of the 212th established a new front line between the SS Police Division and the Spanish Division by 13 February. On the 19th, the newly arrived 24th Division attacked in a counteroffensive and, with the support of tanks and assault guns, recovered some of the lost ground around Krasny Bor. 38

General Esteban-Infantes shored up his Izhora River flank with companies of the 263rd and 269th Regiments, recovered some scattered survivors of Krasny Bor, and improvised new units from sick and wounded men moved up from the field hospital. By 18 February, a stabilized new front extended about two miles to the south, linking with units of the German 212th Division. With only three effective 75-mm anti-tank guns in their possession, the Spanish Division nonetheless gave no further ground to the Soviets, who attacked the Hispano-German forces repeatedly through the end of March.

The Russian objectives in this action, which the Germans called the Second Ladoga Battle, were again to cut off the German forces in the Mga area by means of two widely set pincer strokes, southeast from Kolpino and west from the Volkhov front, near Pogostye. In choosing the Krasny Bor sector, the Russian commanders followed their favorite tactic of attacking at a juncture of two major units, in this case the L Corps and "Group Hilpert" (LIV Corps) boundary, occupied by the Spanish and German 5th Mountain Divisions. Only the fiercely fought, often hand-to-hand defensive action of the Spanish troops against overwhelming odds and the fairly rapid reaction of the higher German commands prevented



a major Soviet success in their drive from Kolpino. The Russians attacking in the Pogostye sector met three German divisions in rugged terrain and were more easily repulsed. [39](#)

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Since the Spanish Division had suffered over three thousand casualties in the fighting at Krasny Bor and the Izhora, the Germans shifted it gradually to the west as new units arrived to take up the defenses around the Russian salient. Ultimately relieved by the 254th Infantry Division on the Izhora flank, the Blue Division by April occupied a narrower sector (about nine miles) centered on the town of Pushkin. Because only about three thousand men arrived from Spain as replacements during the first three months of 1943, the Spaniards found it difficult to reconstitute those units decimated at Krasny Bor. For the remainder of 1943, the Spanish Division exchanged artillery fire and fought patrol actions with their Russian opponents, often



entrenched only a few hundred meters away. [40](#) Spain decided on 25 September 1943 to withdraw her volunteers and requested their immediate removal from the front for preparation for their return. American and British diplomatic pressure had forced this decision, made urgent by Germany's deteriorating situation. To demonstrate Spain's continued interest in the war against Communism, however, a volunteer "Legion" would remain to continue the fight. [41](#)

When the Eighteenth Army ordered Gen. Esteban-Infantes to prepare his unit for withdrawal on 5 October, the Spanish officers assumed that they were to be shifted to yet another sector of the Leningrad Front. The German 81st and 123rd Infantry Divisions relieved the Spanish frontline troops during the night of 7-8 October 1943, and the latter assembled by the 16th west of Gatchina between Nikolavevka and Volosovo. At the time of its departure from the front, the Spanish Division was still below strength by three thousand men and had serious equipment shortages, which indicated that the Germans had not replaced most equipment lost in the battles of the earlier part of the year. The German command finally informed the Spaniards on 14 October that the Division would return to Spain, leaving a legion of undetermined organization in its place. [42](#)



General Esteban-Infantes received his first orders from Spain concerning the withdrawal on 20 October from the Spanish Foreign Ministry. In Berlin, the General was apprised of three conflicting points of view regarding the proposed Legion. The OKW wished to see the strongest possible Spanish contingent organized. The Spanish Foreign Ministry, reflecting Count Jordana's wishes, urged the smallest number possible (one or two battalions). Finally, on 21 October, the Spanish Army Minister directed that:

The Volunteer Legion will be constituted in as many battalions of infantry as the number of volunteers permit. All officers and men with less than six months' service will remain, plus any volunteers having more, that demonstrate a desire to remain. [43](#)

Esteban-Infantes canvassed the division for volunteers and, finding few takers among the soldiers, decided to form the legion from the last seven march battalions. He designated his chief of staff, Colonel Antonio García Navarro, as its commander and devoted his own energies to the return of the division to Spain. After turning in the rest of their German equipment and uniforms at Grafenwöhr, the last men of the division arrived in Spain with General Esteban-Infantes on 18 December 1943. Behind them, buried in the snowy wasteland between Lake Ilmen and Leningrad, lay four thousand of their comrades: men of Posad, the "Green Inferno," Krasny Bor and the men who



fell in two years of continuous artillery barrages and classic position warfare. ⁴⁴

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The extended campaign of the Spanish Division illustrates well the varied fighting conditions of the Leningrad-Volkhov Front that were also faced by most of the other volunteers from Western Europe. However, the stamina and resilience of a complete infantry division, even a poorly equipped one of the German third echelon, allowed the Spaniards more continuous service and enabled them to sustain larger efforts than would have been possible for other European volunteer units. One assumes as well that the increased cohesion of fighting under trained native officers, using their native language and with the support of a native replacement system, however inadequate in scale, also afforded the Spaniards advantages not obtainable in the battalions or small regiments formed by the other "legions."

Generally speaking, the men of the Spanish Blue Division returned home to warm receptions. The government enacted special legislation permitting exceptional employment opportunities for the veterans of the Russian campaign. Many of the ex-divisionarios achieved high standing in the postwar government and Spanish Army, not the least of whom was Agustín Muñoz Grandes, who became a Captain General and the second-highest-ranking official in Spain prior to his death in 1970. ⁴⁵ The men who still remained at the front with the Spanish Legion, however, faced a more ambiguous future.

Propaganda Value and Military Utility

By early 1942, volunteers from Western Europe numbering some 27,000 officers and men—the equivalent of two full-strength divisions—had shouldered German arms on the Eastern Front. At this point, three-quarters of these served in the German Army. In a campaign that cost the Germans almost half a million casualties in its first three months, one may well question the military value of the enterprise. Yet in the case of the Waffen-SS, foreign troops represented virtually the only source of manpower suitable for filling out new combat units. Faced with competition from the army, as well as severe high command restrictions on SS recruitment within the Reich, the SS had attempted direct recruitment in occupied European territories in 1940, but garnered only several hundred men for the SS *Wiking* Division. The foreign legions program of the SS enjoyed more success, since collaborationist parties responded more readily to filling national units for the campaign against Bolshevism. But even after the party faithful had come forward, the legions proved difficult to field with the Waffen-SS because of the difficulty in training them to SS standards, the small size of the legions, and the resultant difficulty in maintaining their combat potential as they suffered casualties. Then, too, came political drawbacks, as the collaborationist political leaders sought local advantages in return for their efforts.



For instance, the Danish collaborationist Frits Clausen carried on a cat-and-mouse game with Himmler for months, as each sought support from the other without yielding concessions. Clausen insisted that he could not take responsibility for the recruiting effort until he had direct liaison with the *Freikorps* and sufficient political clout (presumably with German backing) on the home front. He further attempted to entice the *Reichsführer-SS* with his proposal of raising an entire Danish division for the Waffen-SS, if only he were given sufficient support and political power in Denmark. Himmler only responded with mild encouragement to continue his efforts and a few fallacious concessions, such as the symbolic naming of a new (German) SS regiment "Thule" and—as he informed Clausen with the words, "...this will be a delight to you"—the replacement of Kryssing at the head of the *Freikorps* by the Danish Nazi Party member von Schalburg. He further complimented Clausen on the excellent rapport he had with youths in the *Freikorps*, citing a case where a dying man's last words at the front had been for his "Fører." Such exchanges typified Himmler's policy stance of stringing along his Germanic collaborators without really embracing any doctrine of partnership.

In the meantime, Anton Mussert had been irritating German officials with his requests for increased national autonomy for Holland within the New Order, showing himself to be as nationalistic as Quisling in his stance regarding German policy. Himmler particularly criticized Mussert's statements in favor of a federal European army to be the standard bearer for a new European federation of equal Germanic states. This exaggeration of Nazi Germanic propaganda was soon discouraged. Himmler informed Hans Rauter, his plenipotentiary in Holland, that the Germanic constituents had to realize that a European army would have to serve military ends, not propaganda or political functions, and that the 2600 legionnaires and 2000 volunteers in regular Waffen-SS units remained a far cry from the annual Dutch mobilization strength of 60-80,000 men. ⁴⁷ Mussert was not, however, removed from the German scheme of operations in Holland, as Clausen later was in Denmark. He apparently recognized that he could only make the best of whatever concessions the Germans allowed. He continued to assist in military recruiting despite his diminishing prestige and influence. For example, in late 1943, Mussert made a typical speech in Genderland province in which he compared the National Socialist and the French Revolutions. He called for a ten-fold expansion of the volunteer effort, especially pleading for half of the Dutch workers employed in Germany (roughly 400,000) to volunteer for the front. ⁴⁸

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In their efforts to build and maintain the combat strength of their Western European SS units, Himmler's deputies found that other German agencies interfered with them. Berger told Himmler in April 1942 of a problem he encountered with the Foreign Ministry while the *Freikorps* finished training for the front. A Danish general staff officer had approached a German official, offering himself, two captains, and 150 men for combat service in the Finnish Army. The Foreign Ministry favored exploring the possibility, since the men would not volunteer for either the Wehrmacht or the Waffen-SS. Berger opposed this notion, citing the Führer's order and the OKW agreement on foreign volunteers in the Russian campaign. Himmler backed his subordinate and declined the Foreign ministry's initiative. ⁴⁹

Like their collaborationist colleagues in the Nordic states, Léon Degrelle in Belgium and the Parisian pro-Nazis sought personal influence under the patronage of the occupiers. Degrelle certainly envisioned an expanded postwar Burgundian client state in the New Europe, run by the Rexist Party. He did ensure the survival of the party, as occupation authorities eventually suppressed all but the collaborationists. But Degrelle lacked real political clout with the Belgians, and some of his specific dealings with the Germans caused splits within the Rexist Party. The Germans recognized the situation and kept him at arm's length, except in the case of his military contributions. ⁵⁰

The Walloon and French legions operated only sporadically with the German Army on the Eastern Front, as described above. In the case of the Spanish Division, however, the German Army had a longer, more continuous period of operations in which it evaluated this foreign unit and revealed its own attitude toward such formations.

From the beginning, the German government and military regarded the Spanish Volunteer Division more as a political and propaganda symbol than as a real contribution to the military potential of the Wehrmacht. In the late summer of 1941, few observers predicted the failure of the vaunted German military forces against the demonstrated weaknesses of the Soviet Union. The September war diary of the Ninth Army, which was still victoriously pressing forward, remains representative of this prevalent German attitude toward the volunteer formations in their midst: "... the deployment of the division from faraway Spain has much less a military effect than a political and propaganda effect. Therefore, despite any shortcomings they should be welcome as comrades in the struggle, like we were to

them in the Civil War." [51](#)

The degree to which the German Army expected their Spanish comrades to contribute to the downfall of the Soviet Union was in no way better demonstrated than in the equipment the Germans issued to the Blue Division. The 250th (Spanish) Infantry Division, as its number indicated, was equipped as a third echelon infantry division similar to those mobilized in Germany from older reserve classes for a limited role in combat operations. [52](#)

Thus the Spanish troops were issued the most basic German Army equipment—rifles, machine guns, and cannon—and were denied the more sophisticated armaments, such as tanks, assault guns, self-propelled artillery, and heavy anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons, which were reserved for the elite German units. In retrospect, it remains interesting to note that the 37-mm anti-tank guns of the Spanish Division were reissued upon the Spaniards' withdrawal to rear area security units rather than to combat organizations. [53](#)

From the quality of equipment issued and the brevity of the training period afforded to the Spanish volunteers, it seems probable that the Germans never intended to put them into the forefront of the fighting, despite the obvious Spanish dedication to that end.

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Equally indicative of the German view of the Spanish Division's role was the choice of geographic area where the Spanish troops were deployed. Although their first assignment to the Ninth Army offered them some chance of sharing in the planned seizure of the Soviet capital, the climate in that area and in that of Army Group North, where the Spanish Division actually served, certainly did not allow them to demonstrate their fullest capabilities. Army Group South, where the Germans placed their Latin allies of the Italian Eighth Army, would have proved a much superior location for employment of the Blue Division. It may be argued with some persuasiveness that the Wehrmacht could not afford to weigh such considerations in the allocation of its fighting strength to various fronts, but if the German command did regard the Spanish contingent as militarily valuable, it served no useful purpose to place it in such a forbidding area of operations as the Leningrad-Volkhov sector. The Spanish commanders were rankled also by the separation between the Blue Division and the Volunteer Air Squadron, which remained in the center front. This factor was caused, undoubtedly, by the rerouting of the division as a handy reinforcement to Army Group North rather than by any deliberate act on the part of the Germans. The Spaniards, though, sorely missed what they viewed as their rightful air support, for Soviet aircraft were able to strike their positions seemingly at will, while the overtaxed Luftwaffe could not effectively support all areas of the Army Group North sector. [54](#)

In contrast to the halfhearted way in which the Germans equipped, trained, and deployed the Spanish Division in their service, they became persistently assiduous critics of the Spanish approach to soldiering and warfare. German documents are filled with vituperation and rhetoric to such an extent as to suggest a disdain for all things non-Germanic.

The first hint of discord between Spanish and German procedures occurred at the beginning of the long foot march to the front from the Polish frontier. The Spanish troops found the going quite rough along the poor Russian roads, and their initially high spirits deteriorated somewhat along the 600 miles between Suwalki and Vitebsk. Almost immediately, the German liaison officers with the division remarked upon the ragged march discipline, the overloading of vehicles, and the frequent occurrence of tired men jumping on passing vehicles. [55](#) By 1 September 1941, the Spanish troop discipline was portrayed in terms of "stealing chickens on the march; associating with persons of Jewish race; threatening civilians; lack of march discipline; lack of care for horses, weapons and equipment. Especially noteworthy was the inability of junior officers and non-commissioned officers to enforce their orders to the troops." [56](#)

A week later, the liaison staff reported to Field Marshal Gunther von Kluge—commanding

the Fourth Army, behind which the Spaniards were then crossing—that Spanish march discipline, poor care of the "defective Serbian horses," and problems in small unit leadership remained the key issues, but that these were partially balanced by the "good will and campaign spirit of the Spaniards." Soon the Spanish performance improved, largely through the example and personal efforts of General Muñoz Grandes, and the Germans expressed satisfaction with their marching as the daily rate of movement reached twenty miles per day. ⁵⁷ Upon the arrival of the Spanish Division in the Volkhov in October, though, a liaison officer reported that the Spanish troops on the march still displayed an appearance "unusual to German eyes," perhaps the most truthful and objective comment to date. ⁵⁸

The Spanish performance in the Volkhov-Tikhvin offensive under Group "von Roques" and the XXXVIII Corps elicited a variety of responses from German observers, including some admiration for their great sacrifices in the bloody Posad-Ottenski battles. However, the Spanish pride and reluctance to accept suggestions and advice from non-Spaniards did not set well with the often equally single-minded Germans. The XXXVIII Corps' commander termed the Spaniards "proud, sensitive, suspicious," and the prevailing opinion among the Army Group North staff was that the Spanish were "inflexible" and "slow but sure" in their method of combat and, therefore, "a sure and rapid coordination with the 250th ... [Division] was not feasible." ⁵⁹ It is difficult to determine the specific actions that gave rise to such comments, but the Spaniards themselves often said that the differences between the German and Spanish mentalities remained considerable. The Spaniard looked upon the war as an opportunity to demonstrate his anti-Bolshevik dedication, but the German soldier had sworn a total commitment to an ideological fight to the bitter end. Thus, the Spaniard had little appreciation for "Teutonic" seriousness and discipline as a mode of day-to-day living. However, under the challenge of combat the Spaniard could be depended upon to rise to the occasion with full vigor. ⁶⁰

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Despite such grumbling among the German staff sections, the official policy toward the Spanish troops remained favorable, if somewhat patronizing. Chief of the General Staff Franz Halder made this clear in his letter to Field Marshal von Leeb of 11 November 1941. In this brief note, Halder took note of the fact that Spanish troops did not measure up to German norms of general discipline and care of horses, weapons, and equipment. He nevertheless urged Leeb to approach the Spanish command with delicacy and tact, in consideration of the political significance of any German official actions. ⁶¹

Thus, those attributes which remained typically Spanish in areas such as general conduct and administration enjoyed a degree of grudging toleration by German authorities. The Spaniards, on occasion, stretched such toleration to the limit, particularly in the case of furloughed personnel in the rear areas. German district commanders from as far away as Königsberg reported "wild, undisciplined public conduct" and even Spanish sources conceded a certain libertinism on the part of their off-duty personnel, such as when competing with German submariners in Königsberg for the nocturnal pleasures of the city. ⁶² In fact, the



amount of fraternization enjoyed by Spanish troops led the Germans, in their typically organized fashion, to request data from the Spanish Division on the number of Spanish soldiers who presumably had married local nationals, the type of ceremonies performed, and the nationality of the spouses. This request received a rather terse response from General Muñoz Grandes to the effect that such marriages were forbidden, as was the transportation of any women to Spain. ⁶³



The German observers never overlooked any Spanish shortcomings in battle. Their harshest criticism fell upon the Spanish performance in the action of 22-24 June 1942, during the mop-up of the Volkhov Pocket, or "Green Inferno." Colonel Hoppe, whose battle group of

German Army, SS, Flemish, and Spanish troops carried out the operation in the Zamoshye area, was admonished by higher headquarters because of the relatively heavy losses suffered by the Spanish contingents in that operation. Apparently, the official German policy had been to conserve the Spanish Division while it rebuilt itself in the aftermath of its losses from the first four months of operation. In his official after-action report, Hoppe pointed out that, in his opinion, such casualties should not have occurred in a mop-up action, and Spanish ineptitude and inexperience remained the real reasons for them. The casualty figures for that period support his views, for the two German battalions sustained only ten to forty percent of the casualties recorded for the two Spanish battalions involved. ⁶⁴

Spanish reports maintained that the German units failed to support them in their first advance of 21-22 June and, when met by Russian small arms and light artillery fire from the front and flanks, they had been forced to withdraw to their original starting points. They claimed also that their units withdrew with "order and enthusiasm." ⁶⁵

Hoppe, on the other hand, presented evidence to the contrary, indicating that the Spanish units had advanced carelessly into action and, upon their initial surprise at meeting strong Russian resistance, had fallen back in complete disorder. He referred to a report by SS Major Burk, who commanded the group composed of his 2nd SS Infantry Regiment staff, the SS *Legion Flandern*, a battalion of the 20th Motorized Division, and the 232nd Security Battalion. Burk reported that "... he met Spaniards, even officers, who had thrown all their weapons and equipment away and he had to halt them with his pistol in hand and force them to return [to their position]." ⁶⁶ Hoppe concluded that the Spanish

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... military development is wholly unsatisfactory. The officers don't control their men and do not follow [sound] military or tactical principles. Also, the men have totally insufficient basic training. Thoughtlessness and carelessness lead to their shocking casualties. ⁶⁷

The German reports on the action advised that the use of Spanish units in conjunction with those of other nationalities could serve no useful purpose. The Spanish training deficiencies, tactical errors in massing troops and failing to make proper use of terrain, lack of initiative in small unit leadership, and the difficulty in communicating among the mixed units due to the insufficient numbers of translators were all cited as primary reasons for this judgment. The last item in that list might have had greater influence in the conduct of the forest fighting than all the others, but the conclusion of the report was that the Spanish units should be left to fight alone and under their own leadership to the extent that the level of training of the Spanish Division permitted. ⁶⁸

The Volkhov Pocket operation probably represented the nadir of Spanish military performance, but whether it approached the depths of the German observations or not must remain a subjective judgment in absence of sufficient eyewitness accounts. In general, the German Army found the Spanish officer and soldier to be

... willing, hard and personally brave ... [but] excessively self-conscious stemming from his lack of discipline; he is fatalistically indifferent and makes poor judgments. The leadership is unimaginative and schematic, owing to the spirited interest of Spaniards in delayed, political type discussions. ⁶⁹

Ultimately, the military value of the early volunteer formations of the Army and Waffen-SS must be measured at the time of their withdrawal in the summer of 1943. In the Army, the large Spanish Division had shown itself capable of performing as a second line German infantry unit in limited offensive and static defensive missions. Thanks to its size, its employment of regular army officers, and its replacement system, it performed well under a

harsh climate and demanding military situation. The smaller French Legion utterly failed in the same circumstances as a reinforcement regiment for combat duty with the German Army, and only over time and after thorough reorganization did it perform adequately as a rear area security unit. The Walloon Legion, almost a miniature of the French LVF, saw sparing use in rear security missions, stoutly fought in the defensive, and managed a single mop-up operation in the offensive. Its exploits hardly matched Degrelle's rhetoric and postwar memoirs, but it eventually developed an esprit and some level of internal cohesion under the care of its German division.

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Preface

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In the SS, the several thousand Germans and several hundred Germanic volunteers of SS *Wiking* Division had proven themselves worthy of elite division status after the drive into the Ukraine in 1941 and the demanding battles carried into the Caucasus in late 1942. However, casualties and a sluggish Germanic replacement system kept the proportion of Germans to Germanics quite high. Of the roughly six thousand men in the SS legions program, only the thousand Danes of the *Freikorps* found employment as frontline troops as they reinforced the Totenkopf Division. After recovering from the crucible of Demansk, the Danes paralleled their fellow legionnaires in occupying static defenses with the SS infantry brigades. The Dutch Regiment and the Norwegian and Flemish battalions all became rear security units, fighting stiff mop-up operations in the Volkhov Pocket, and then joined the 2nd SS Infantry Brigade in the siege lines of Leningrad. In effect, the 2nd Brigade became a supra-legionary unit, presaging the legions' incorporation into the Waffen-SS as full-fledged units of the SS military order.

The brief campaign in which Wehrmacht planners expected the volunteer formations to participate did not terminate with a victory parade in Moscow at year's end. Rather, the volunteers endured the second campaign year, emerging from the experience in 1943 with their strength sharply reduced. If the Germans were to capitalize upon volunteer manpower in their war effort, clearly more decisive and effective means of putting these forces into action would have to be found.

Notes:

Note 1: Telegram, Stohrer to Foreign Minister, 22 June 1941, in U.S. Department of State, *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945*, Ser. D, vol. 12, doc. 671, (Washington: G.P.O., 1964), 1080-81 (hereafter cited as DGFP). For Ribbentrop's circular, see Multex no. 401 of 21 June 1941, DGFP, vol. 12, 1072-73. Suñer's motivation drew as much from his desire to strengthen his own power as any genuine sympathy for the German effort. See Klaus-Jörg Ruhl, *Spanien im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Hamburg: Hoffman und Campe, 1975), 29-30. [Back.](#)

Note 2: Telegram, Ribbentrop to Stohrer, 24 June 1941, DGFP, vol. 12, doc 671, fn. 2, 1081. For the best English language work on Germany's policy toward Spain in the war, see Charles B. Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy and Spain in World War II* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1968); on the Spanish Volunteer Division, see Gerald R. Kleinfeld, and Lewis A. Tambs, *Hitler's Spanish Legion: The Blue Division in Russia* (Carbondale, IL, Southern. Illinois University Press, 1979). Both these dated works must be corrected with the essays and bibliography appearing in Ricardo Recio Cardona, ed., *Españoles en la II Guerra Mundial, el frente del Este* (Madrid, Ediciones Vandalia, 1999), especially Rafael Ibáñez Hernández, "Españoles en las trincheras: la División Azul," 55-87. See also Stanley Payne and Delia Contreras, ed., *España y la Segunda Guerra Mundial* (Madrid: Editorial Complutense, 1996). [Back.](#)

Note 3: The most authoritative analysis is Javier Tussel, *Franco, España y la II Guerra Mundial: entre el Eje y la neutralidad*. (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 1995); see especially 13-16, 83ff. [Back.](#)

Note 4: Traditional notions justifying the decision to send Spanish volunteers are ably refuted by Denis Smyth, "The Dispatch of the Spanish Blue Division to the Russian Front: Reasons and Repercussions," *European History Quarterly* 24 (1994): 537-553. Rafael García Pérez has written a detailed dissertation and book covering the German-Spanish negotiations after the Spanish Civil War over German expenses. He alleges that a direct offset for German Civil War expenses was proposed by Spain, using Spanish Volunteer Division expenses totaling some 613.5 billion pesetas, of which 56.5 percent would have been charged against Spain's Civil War expenses, which in any event never saw a final resolution. Although an interesting construct, García Pérez' work does not alter my view of Franco as forever an opportunistic fence-sitter in the war; *Franquismo y Tercer Reich: las relaciones económicas hispano-alemanas durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Constitucionales, 1994), 263-67, 629, 505. [Back.](#)

Note 5: Telegram, Stohrer to Foreign Ministry, 25 June 1941, DGFP, vol. 13, 16-17; Telegram, Heberlein (chargé) to Foreign Ministry, 4 July 1941, *ibid.*, 81; Ramón Garriga, *Las Relaciones Secretas Entre Franco y Hitler* (Buenos Aires: J. Alvarez, 1965), 273-79; Rafael Ibáñez Hernández, in "Españoles en las trincheras," 56-59, details the conditions of recruitment. Gonzales Saez and García Rebull interviews. [Back.](#)

Note 6: Emilio Esteban-Infantes, *La División Azul* (Barcelona: Editorial AHR, 1956), Introduction; Clyde L. Clark, *Evolution of the Franco Regime* (n.p., 1951), 410; Stanley G. Payne, *Politics and the Military in Modern Spain* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1967), 426-33. Ibáñez Hernández, "Españoles en las trincheras," 62-65. [Back.](#)

Note 7: Instituto de Historia y Cultura Militar (IHCM), Archivo General Militar de Avila, Archives of the Spanish Volunteer Division (División Española de Voluntarios), Armario 28/ Legajo 1/ Carpeta 4/Documento 1, and 28/331/2 (hereafter cited as DEV). Tables of Organization also appear in Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 25, and in OKH, T-78/ 412/ 6380886-7. Ramón Salas notes that the four-regiment scheme reflected the typical division structure of the Spanish Civil War, but other sources show the contemporary Spanish Army had already converted to the more modern triangular division. Ramón Salas Larrazábal, "La Division 'AZUL'," *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains* 158 (April 1990): 50. Ibáñez Hernández, "Españoles en las trincheras," 66, characterizes the fixed reserve regiment as a depot not intended for combat, but this is not supported by a reading of the division's documents above. The term "Blue Division" until recently was scorned by many regular officers —preferring the official designation of División Española de Voluntarios—as is the term "soldiers," as opposed to official "volunteers." These were the 'politically correct' terms adopted by the Franco regime. [Back.](#)

Note 8: Jusús Salas Larrazábal, "Actuación en Rusia de los Escuadrillas Expedicionarias Españolas." *Aeroplano* 2 (October 1984): 50-96. The five squadrons served in sequence with Luftwaffe fighter groups supporting Army Group Center, hence never in support of their own division. The last flight withdrew in February 1944. [Back.](#)

Note 9: DEV, 28/33/1/2; Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 19; DGFP, vol. 12, 81. Fernando Vadillo, *Orillas de Voljov* (Barcelona: Ediciones Marte, 1971), 39-40; Juan Eugenio Blanco, *Rusia no es Cuestión de un Día* (Madrid: Publicaciones Españoles, 1954), 7. [Back.](#)

Note 10: DEV, 23/33/1/2. Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 25; Ibáñez Hernandez, "Españoles en las trincheras," 70. [Back.](#)

Note 11: Army Group North Report, T311/72/7093733-55, *passim*. The Spanish were undoubtedly encouraged to anticipate mechanization by a German request that they bring large numbers of motor vehicles and communication equipment. See the file of the Madrid Embassy in the German Foreign Office File, Series 502, filmed by the U.S. State Department in T120/295/728-9. [Back.](#)

Note 12: Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 22-24; Blanco, *Rusia no es Cuestión*, 12-13; Vadillo, *Orillas de Voljov*, 145; Tomás Salvador, *División 250* (Barcelona: Ediciones Domus, 1954), 47; Tomás García Rebull interview, Madrid, 20/3/74. [Back.](#)

Note 13: Esteban Infantes, *División Azul*, 22-24; Garriga, *Relaciones Secretas*, 273-80; Blanco, *Rusia no es Cuestión*, 13-14; DEV, 28/33/4/1; Ibáñez Hernandez, "Españoles en las trincheras," 71-72; García Rebull interview and Antonio Gonzales Saez interview, Madrid, 20/3/74. [Back.](#)

Note 14: Dionisio Anfiesta interview, Madrid, 21/3/74; Andrés Gonzáles Martínez, *Alas Españoles Sobre Moscú* (Madrid: Editorial Aeronautica, 1955), 29-50; Garriga, *Relaciones Secretas*, 273-75. [Back.](#)

Note 15: According to Förster, the German Army first planned a three-month training period, which was shortened to a single month on the pleading of Muñoz Grandes. This may indicate the prevalent sense of the volunteer groups that the war would end that fall with a victory parade in Moscow. Förster, "Freiwilligen," 1055. [Back.](#)

Note 16: Ninth Army Headquarters War Journal, T312/281/7842323-27. [Back.](#)

Note 17: *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommando der Wehrmacht 1940-45*, 6 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Gräfe, 1965), 1:655-59 (hereafter cited KTB des OKW). [Back.](#)

Note 18: Franz Halder, *Kriegstagebuch*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1964), 3:249. This simple operational reason for the change of the Spanish Division's zone of action has been missed by all other observers. Even Tussel suggests that perhaps the Germans changed the assignment because of their low opinion of the combat value of the unit (Franco, 290). [Back.](#)

Note 19: Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 57-59. An OKW letter dated 14 November 1941, titled "Operational Foreign Volunteers," lists the following (quoted):

Army	Waffen-SS
1. Spanish Division	Finnish Bn. in SS Division Das Reich
2. French reinforcement regiment in Army Group Center	2. Norwegian Bn.
3. Wallonian Battalion no. 373 of 97th Infantry Division	3. Dutch Legion - 1 Regt.
4. Croatian reinforcement regiment in 100th Infantry Division	4. Danish Bn.
	5. Volksdeutsch Bn. from Slavic countries

OKH files, T311/99/7130653. [Back.](#)

Note 20: DEV, 28/33/13/11; I Corps, T314/40/1200-34; Sixteenth Army, T312/544/8151643; Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 59. In light of the great disparities existing among German, Spanish, and Russian spellings of geographic names, the latest U.S. Army Map Service publications have been used for this study. [Back.](#)

Note 21: DEV, 28/33/11/3; 250th Division, T315/1720/55-56; Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 59-70. [Back.](#)

Note 22: DEV, 28/34/1/1; Army Group North, T311/72/7093-155; Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 73-80; García Rebull and Gonzales Saez interviews. 33rd Corps replaced Group "von Roques" in command of the southern

Volkhov flank on 14 November. [Back.](#)

Note 23: DEV, 28/34/3/3; 250th Division, T315/1726/59-64; Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 80-84; Vadillo, *Orillas de Voljov*, 621; Gonzales Saez and García Rebull interviews. Gen. García Rebull recalled that in one company, the 3rd of the I/263 Battalion, only one officer and seven men remained to walk out of Posad on the night of 7 December. [Back.](#)

Note 24: Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 80-86. Without exception those Spanish veterans interviewed expressed such respect for the volume and lethality of the Soviet artillery that they labeled it the "best in the world." [Back.](#)

Note 25: DEV, 28/34/3/3; 250th Division, T315/1726/66/274; Sixteenth Army, T312/544/3151850-5; Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 87-90; García Rebull interview. [Back.](#)

Note 26: Army Group North, T311/72/7093813; Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 105-08, 302; Jose Díaz de Villegas, *La División Azul en Línea* (Barcelona: Ediciones Acervo, 1967), 158-59. [Back.](#)

Note 27: Army, T312/1596/692-830. [Back.](#)

Note 28: XXXVIII Corps, T314/898/960; DEV, 28/34/8/1; Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 112-14. [Back.](#)

Note 29: 126th Infantry Division, T315/1360/79-80; Army Group North, T311/72/7093834-42; Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 114-19; Eighteenth Army, T312/1596/692-830. [Back.](#)

Note 30: Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Chicago: Regnery, 1958), 260-64; Haupt, Heeresgruppe Nord, 113-16; Emilio Esteban-Infantes, *Blaue Division: Spaniens Freiwillige an der Ostfront*, abridged, translated with annotations by Werner Haupt (Leoni am Starnberger See: Druffel, 1958), 152-55. [Back.](#)

Note 31: DEV, 28/35/12/1, 29/36/1/2; LIV Corps, T314/1352/277-83, 316; Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 119-27. [Back.](#)

Note 32: Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Chicago: Regnery, 1958), 265-66; Haupt, *Heeresgruppe Nord*, 134-36 [Back.](#)

Note 33: Clark, *Evolution of the Franco Regime*, 353; Payne, *Politics and the Military*, 431-32; Carleton J. H. Hayes, *Wartime Mission to Spain* (New York: Macmillan, 1945), 53-59. [Back.](#)

Note 34: Ibañez Hernandez, "Españoles en las trincheras," 64-65. No satisfactory biography exists of either of the commanders of the Spanish Volunteer Division, and the memoirs of their interpreter errs into hagiography and Germanophilia. See Juan Ackermann Hanisch, *A las Ordenes de Vucencia: Autobiografía del intérprete de los Generales Muñoz Grandes y Esteban-Infantes* (Madrid: Barbarroja, 1993). [Back.](#)

Note 35: Army Group North, "Kriegsjahrbuch 1942," T311/136/7181595-732. Also see T311/99/7069367; Haupt, *Heeresgruppe Nord*, 141-48; Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 130. [Back.](#)

Note 36: Army Group North, T311/99/7069406-55. [Back.](#)

Note 37: 250th Division, T315/1726/431-36; Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 158-71; Gonzales Saez and Julio Esteban-Infantes interviews. The assault force consisted in the main of the Soviet 45th, 72nd, and 63rd Rifle Divisions, with two brigades of tanks and other supporting units. Ponte and Auzunema were posthumously awarded the *Laureada* on

15 February 1944 and 20 November 1945, respectively. [Back.](#)

Note 38: Army Group North, T311/99/70694070-93; L Corps, T314/1235/ 631-833; Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 170-77. [Back.](#)

Note 39: Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 170-77.; 250th Division, T315/1726/437-44. Husemann noted the heavy Spanish casualties, but concluded that the "panicky flight of the Spaniards hazarded the left flank of the [SS Police] Division," Friedrich Husemann, *Die guten Glauben waren*, 2 vols. (Osnabrück: Munin, 1971), 2:137. [Back.](#)

Note 40: Husemann, *Die guten Glauben waren*, 2:137 ; DEV, 29/39/11/1 and 29/40/8/1. [Back.](#)

Note 41: Hayes, *Wartime Mission*, 157-65; Memo, Hayes to Secretary of State, 30 March 1943, in State Department, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1943*, 6 vols. (Washington: G.P.O., 1962), 2:606; Airgram, Hayes to Secretary of State, 29 July 1943, *FRUS 1943*, 2:611-17; Samuel Hoare, Viscount Templewood, *Ambassador on Special Mission* (London: Collins, 1946), 250-59; Dieckhoff report in OKW files, T-77/885/5634781. [Back.](#)

Note 42: Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 229-44; L Corps, T314/1244/283 and 1322; Eighteenth Army, T312/914/9097066. [Back.](#)

Note 43: DEV, 28/18/9/4. [Back.](#)

Note 44: DEV, 28/18/9/4, 11/4 and 15/2; OKW, T77/856/5601717-12, T/885/5634748; *KTB des OKW*, 5:1183-84, 1217, 1316; Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 229-44; Julio Esteban-Infantes interview. [Back.](#)

Note 45: Clark, *Evolution of the Franco Regime*, 387; Segundo Cuaderno, *La División Azul* (Madrid: Vicesecretaría de Educación Popular, 1943), 21-24. Postwar careers of many of the officers and men of the Blue Division were mentioned in Raymond Proctor, *Agony of a Neutral: Spanish-German Wartime Relations and the "Blue Division"* (Moscow, ID: Research Foundation, 1974), a primarily diplomatic study with unfortunate inaccuracies in the recounting of the Spanish Division's operational history. Less unsatisfactory is Gerald R. Kleinfeld and Lewis A. Tambs, *Hitler's Spanish Legion: The Blue Division in Russia* [Back.](#)

Note 46: Clausen letters 4/2/42, 19/2/42, T175/17/2520986-8; Himmler letter 4/3/42, T175/17/2520993-4. [Back.](#)

Note 47: Himmler letter 28/2/42, T175/74/2592584-5. [Back.](#)

Note 48: Norman Rich, *Hitler's War Aims, vol. 2, The Establishment of the New Order* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 156-57; Text of Mussert speech in police report, 12/10/43, T175/63/2579155. [Back.](#)

Note 49: Berger letter, 5/4/42, T175/14/2635489. [Back.](#)

Note 50: Tommy J. Knight, "The Establishment of German Military Government in Belgium, 1940-41," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas, 1967), 122-23, 127-28. Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 61-175, passim. [Back.](#)

Note 51: Ninth Army, T312/281/78442327. [Back.](#)

Note 52: An excellent short evaluation of the German Army's peacetime organization is in Robert M. Kennedy, *The German Campaign in Poland*, DAP 20-255 (Washington: G.P.O., 1956), 26-31. [Back.](#)

Note 53: Eighteenth Army, T312/914/9097066. [Back.](#)

Note 54: Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 210-11; Emilio Esteban-Infantes interview. [Back.](#)

Note 55: 250th Division, T315/1726/49. [Back.](#)

Note 56: 250th Division, T315/1726/50. [Back.](#)

Note 57: 250th Division, T315/1726/51. [Back.](#)

Note 58: Army Group North, T311/72/7093680-730. [Back.](#)

Note 59: Army Group North, T311/72/7093733-56; Sixteenth Army, T312/544/8151826. [Back.](#)

Note 60: Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 95-96; Emilio Esteban-Infantes and Gonzales Saez interviews. [Back.](#)

Note 61: Army Group North, T311/72/7093721. [Back.](#)

Note 62: Army Group North, T311/72/7093779, 7093897; Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 205-06; Vadillo, Orillas de Voljov, 186; Blanco, *Rusia no es Cuestión*, 58. [Back.](#)

Note 63: Army Group North, T311/72/7130677. [Back.](#)

Note 64: 126th Infantry Division, T315/1360/79-89. [Back.](#)

Note 65: DEV, 28/35/7/2. [Back.](#)

Note 66: 126th Division, T315/1360/86-90. The German view is supported in Salvador, Division 250, 251-56 and Vadillo, *Arrabales de Leningrado* (Barcelona: Ediciones Marte, 1971), 402-06. [Back.](#)

Note 67: Army Group North, T311/72/7093834-42. [Back.](#)

Note 68: Ibid., frame 7093839. [Back.](#)

Note 69: OKH, Foreign Armies South, T78/445/6419511. [Back.](#)

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