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## Introduction

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## Introduction

Like most significant historical events, the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39 has spawned a vast historiography of competing interpretations. In the six decades since the Nationalist victory, the gradual declassification of hundreds of thousands of documents associated with the war has increased, not diminished, the intensity of scholarly debate on many issues surrounding the Iberian struggle. Among the few points of consistent agreement, at least among historians in the West, has been the unambiguously negative assessment of the role of Stalin and the Soviet Union. In this protracted, bloody struggle that not only pitted Spaniard against Spaniard, but also drew into the fray a broad range of notorious characters—Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco, among others—the great villain has always been Stalin. The Soviet dictator acquired his disreputable status before the war even began, and he retained the position long after the last Russian advisor left the Iberian Peninsula.

His ignominious reputation is reflected in nearly all Western scholarship on the war, whether specialized studies by either Nationalist sympathizers or Republicans in exile, or general treatments of European history written in England or America. It would be difficult to locate even a brief overview of the civil war published outside of Russia that does not in some fashion demonize the Soviet dictator. This was the case even at the very outset of the rebellion, when Nationalist propagandists declared a *cruzada* to liberate Spain from communist influence, and it is no less true today, even in acclaimed works on modern history. A widely-read recent monograph on international history introduces the issue with the following unambiguous assessment: "For as Russian arms appeared and foreign volunteers gathered to serve in the Comintern-organized International Brigades, the poisonous tendrils of Stalinism started to smother Republican Spain." <sup>1</sup>

If most historians have accepted Stalin's basic malfeasance as a non-debatable starting point, the broader questions concerning Soviet involvement in the civil war continue to generate greater controversy than any other area of the conflict. Since the war's end, a full explication of Soviet involvement has eluded historians, remaining hidden away in restricted archives or confined to untranslated Russian memoirs. But not all of this story is unknown. Some features of that rare moment of Russo-Hispanic contact are quite familiar, and are seen as being as elemental in the broad sweep of modern European history as any other major signpost. Consider the sensational episode of Moscow's acquisition of the Spanish gold, an event repeatedly revisited in the Western media, told most famously in a widely-read article in *Reader's Digest*. Or take Hemingway's immensely popular and readable description of the Madrid haunt of the Soviet contingent in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; or, in an equally famous book, Orwell's condemnation of the communists' destruction of anarchist militias in *Homage to Catalonia*. Elsewhere, only brief flashes of the Soviet presence in Spain have illuminated our historical memory: Stalin's warning that his men "stay out of the range of artillery fire"; the dramatic, sudden appearance of Soviet fighters over the skies of Madrid, preventing Franco's capture of the capital; and the strange, inexplicable sight of enormous banners depicting Lenin and Stalin hanging in the Puerta del Sol.

But much more of this unique meeting of the Slavic and Hispanic worlds is not remembered, having remained obscured by decades of dictatorship and archival inaccessibility—in Spain until the late 1970s, and in Russia until 1991. Lacking the documentary evidence to construct a basic narrative of Soviet-Spanish relations, most scholars have long been reduced to speculating on Stalin's motives for entering the Iberian war. So preoccupied have historians been with assessing the reasons behind Soviet intervention and divining the dictator's supposed intentions that the evolution and

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mechanics of the operation, and the extent of its effectiveness and success, have never been treated in satisfactory detail. This project seeks to break new ground in focusing not only on what Stalin and the Kremlin leadership decreed, imagined, and planned for Spain, but on what Soviet men and matériel in the field were able to accomplish.

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To provide a preview for the following chapters, this introduction will briefly summarize and contextualize the main features of Soviet participation in the war. Though the October 1936 appearance in the Republican zone of Spain of Soviet advisors and weapons is often considered a sudden, unprecedented intrusion by Moscow into Spanish affairs, it was in fact the culmination of not only months but years of a steadily increasing Soviet presence on the Iberian Peninsula. Prior to the Bolshevik seizure of power, Tsarist Russia and Bourbon Spain had enjoyed a long history of relations, but the overthrow of Nicholas II temporarily severed all official Russo-Spanish ties. In advancing its international objectives, however, the Soviet Union never limited itself to normal diplomatic channels. While Soviet overtures for normalized relations were repeatedly rebuffed by the Spanish government, the Comintern—the Foreign Commissariat's omnipresent shadow—was active and successful in disseminating communist propaganda throughout Spain from 1920 on.

In the early 1930s, through various front organizations—most notably several dozen Spanish chapters of the Friends of the Soviet Union—Moscow was able to acquaint many thousands of Spaniards with the Kremlin's approved version of the Soviet experiment. At the same time, the Soviet regime and the Comintern together endeavored to gather critical information on the nature of Spanish politics, society, and culture, and cemented ties with potential collaborators and fellow-travelers in advance of a later, still-unimagined precipitating event. This was the Kremlin's policy everywhere at the time: infiltrate, penetrate, and hope for an opening. Moscow's propaganda onslaught and clandestine maneuverings in Spain were nothing unusual during the interwar period, but these activities would take on immense importance in the autumn of 1936, when the Spanish Republic became the first and only Western European state to request Soviet military assistance to quell an internal rebellion.

It may be useful to delineate Soviet participation in the civil war into five distinct, if slightly overlapping periods:

1. From 18 July to 2 August 1936, the Soviet government attempted to assess the situation in Spain through consultations with its agents in the field, but the regime took no action, either domestically or internationally.
2. From 3 August to 20 August, Moscow began exploiting events in Spain for a propaganda campaign, both domestically and internationally.
3. From 21 August to 1 October, the Soviet regime stepped up its involvement with the Republic on the diplomatic and humanitarian fronts, and began paving the way for long-term military intervention.
4. The period from October 1936 to June 1937 marked the high point of Soviet intervention: regular shipments of the most advanced military equipment were sent to Spain; over one thousand Soviet tank crews and pilots were active in combat on the side of the Republic; diplomatic relations were conducted at the highest levels; the Soviet populace was continually rallied by its government to support the Republican cause; and cultural exchanges between the two countries were planned and implemented.
5. The period from July 1937 to April 1939 saw the decline of Soviet participation in all areas of the Republic's affairs: military assistance was dramatically scaled back; very little additional equipment was sent, and no upgrades were made to the existing

arsenals; Soviet pilots and tank crews were withdrawn; diplomatic ties were downgraded; cultural exchanges ended; and the domestic solidarity campaigns were discontinued.

To trace the general succession of events, let us now examine the main features of each of these periods.

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Though the Soviet regime had established a presence in Spain before the civil war began, the Kremlin was slow to respond to the outbreak of hostilities, and did not immediately appreciate the magnitude and likely duration of the war. Indeed, the rebel uprising caught the Soviet leadership somewhat unawares, and for two weeks the Kremlin took no definite action whatsoever. From 18 July to 2 August 1936, Moscow hastily gathered as much information as possible through consultations with Comintern agents on the ground in Spain and its diplomatic officials in Western Europe. It was only on the third day of August that the Stalinist regime began to implement a policy in reaction to the events 3500 kilometers away in Spain. As we will see, from early August 1936 until the war's end on 1 April 1939, Kremlin policy would be not only varied, encompassing numerous separate strands of involvement, but implemented piecemeal, in stages.

Stalin did not approve military aid to the Republic until the middle of September 1936, nearly two months after the war began. But long before beginning its military intervention, the Soviet government had seized on the Nationalist uprising as an opportunity to rally domestic and international support for the Stalinist regime. It is striking how quickly Moscow acted to convert events on the distant Iberian Peninsula—a region with no discernable place in the Soviet imagination of the mid-1930s—into a cause for which the Soviet populace was compelled to noisily demonstrate their support and make sizable individual contributions for humanitarian aid. 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. At the same time that the Politburo was promoting this domestic solidarity campaign, the Comintern began a similar campaign internationally.

The Kremlin's serious initial commitment to exploiting Spain's misfortunes domestically 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 Kol'tsov to begin covering the war directly from the Republican zone. Kol'tsov arrived in Spain on 8 August. A week later, on 15 August, the Politburo authorized the immediate dispatch to Madrid of two Soviet filmmakers. Three weeks later, their newsreels from the front were already being screened in Moscow theaters. 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. To be sure, in the state-run print and visual media the war in Spain was depicted as a struggle between the democratically-elected Spanish government and an invading army of foreign-sponsored fascists. The Soviet dictator saw events in Spain as an opportunity to step up anti-fascist rhetoric.

The third stage of the USSR's escalating involvement in Spanish affairs—the approximately six weeks from 21 August to 1 October—was characterized by an increase in Moscow's anti-fascist rhetoric both at home and abroad. During this period, the domestic solidarity campaigns were expanded and intensified, while internationally the Comintern began recruiting volunteers for the International Brigades. Most conspicuously, the Kremlin now hastened to effect diplomatic rapprochement with the Spanish Republicans. On 21 August, the Soviet government appointed Marcel Rosenberg as its ambassador to Spain. He and his staff, including economic and military attachés, arrived before the end of the month. In late September, the diplomatic missions to the Republic were completed with the appointment of Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko as consul general to Catalonia. Simultaneously, the Soviet government prepared a friendly and generous reception for the new Spanish ambassador, Marcelino Pascua, who departed Madrid for his post in Moscow on the first day of October.

Finally, it should be noted that on 23 August the Soviet government joined the Non-Intervention Committee. Moscow's representative at the London organization, Ivan Maiskii, soon became the Republic's most tireless international advocate, railing at every opportunity against German and Italian violations of the agreement. Direct Soviet intervention in the war was green-lighted in mid-September, when Stalin approved an operational blueprint for military assistance.

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All of the major components of the Soviet intervention in Spain were set in motion and reached their high point during the relatively short period between October 1936 and June 1937. During these nine months, Moscow was involved with Spanish affairs on many separate fronts simultaneously. The Red Army air force, through its use of advanced I-16 fighters and SB bombers, allowed the Republic to regain the advantage in the skies it had lost several weeks into the war. Soviet-led mechanized units, operating the technologically superior T-26 tank, played an instrumental role in thwarting the rebel assault on the Spanish capital.

During the peak period of Soviet intervention, closer ties with the Spanish Republic also proliferated in non-military areas. Soviet diplomats, advisors, and NKVD agents played a major role in shaping Republican politics and succeeded both in advancing the fortunes of the Spanish Communist Party and, in May 1937, in replacing the Republic's uncooperative premier, Largo Caballero, with the more malleable Juan Negrín. In the cultural arena, the Soviet Union sent to Spain large quantities of propaganda materials, which were disseminated by the active embassy staffs and by Spanish collaborators in communist front organizations. On its own domestic front, meanwhile, 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 the Spanish Nationalists as part of a larger, anti-communist international fascist conspiracy. To facilitate the campaign, the Kremlin directed the state-run media to provide saturation coverage of all aspects of the civil war and the domestic reactions to it. A key component in rallying the masses to the solidarity movement were the three thousand Spanish war orphans evacuated to the USSR in 1937, whose relative comfort and security were relentlessly exploited as evidence of Stalin's munificence.

The fifth stage—the twenty-one-month period between June 1937 and the end of the war on 1 April 1939—was marked by a steady diminishment in Moscow's involvement with the Republic. The most noticeable aspect of the Kremlin's slow disentangling from its relations with Spain was the reduction of military shipments to the Republic. Just as the flow of tanks and planes had all but ceased, Spanish tank crews gradually replaced Soviet crews in active combat, and Republican pilots soon took the place of Soviet flyers in the Loyalist air force. Occurring simultaneously was the downgrading or abandonment of diplomatic relations and cultural ties between the two countries. In June 1937, the Soviets recalled their last ambassador from Spain; by February 1938, with more than a year to go before the end of the war, the Republicans followed suit, withdrawing their highest representative from Moscow and never appointing a successor. As the Soviets withdrew diplomatically from Spain, they also discontinued the propaganda onslaught which just months earlier had brought many thousands of copies of Soviet books, newspapers, and journals to the Republican zone.

In sum, Stalin's interwar Spanish gamble constituted a bold, multi-faceted, and unprecedented projection of Soviet power into southwestern Europe, but one that was revealed in short order as thoroughly untenable and thus sensibly aborted. By any reasonable measure, Stalin's intervention in Spain was enormously ambitious, yet it was an operational failure of roughly the same scale. The basic error in the wide-ranging historiography on this topic has always been to view Stalin's position in Spain as one based on strength rather than weakness. If framed within the context of failure, and defined

more by impotence than puissance, Stalin's long-standing reputation as the villain of the Spanish Civil War may appear in a strikingly different light, and his overall contribution to the Loyalist struggle may therefore be seen as deserving a nuanced revision.

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**Notes:**

**Note 1:** Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 380. [Back.](#)

[Stalin and the Spanish Civil War](#)