



[Email this citation](#)

Introduction

I. Diplomacy

1. Pre-July 1936

2. Civil War

3. To Moscow

II. Soviet Aid

4. Solidarity

5. Children

III. Cultural Policy

6. Pre-War

7. Agit-prop

8. Home Front

IV. Military Aid

9. Operation X

10. Hardware

11. Spanish Gold

V. Soviet Advisors

12. Command

13. Activities

14. Air Force

15. Tank Crews

16. Success & Failure

Conclusion

Appendix A

Appendix B

Bibliography

9. Operation X

1

I. The Initiation of Operation X

Throughout the late summer of 1936, Soviet agents on the Iberian Peninsula kept Moscow well informed of the deteriorating fortunes of Republican forces. The Soviet government had at its disposal two independent intelligence services reporting from Spain: the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, or NKVD, and the Comintern's own stable of informants and spies. Soviet and Comintern field agents sent detailed reports to Moscow, assessing the Republic's military deficiencies and drawing special attention to the critically depleted state of Republican air power, tanks, and artillery. In the first Comintern session after the Nationalist uprising, that of 23 July 1936, a report indicated that the rebels had won over many key military units. ¹ Soviet intelligence estimated in late August that the Republic possessed just one rifle for every three soldiers and one machine-gun for every 150 to 200 men. ²

Maurice Thorez presented equally alarming information to the 16 September session of the Comintern Presidium, informing them that, "The government forces have no plan for a regular army or unified command." ³ A week later, on 22 September, the Comintern agent Vittorio Codavilla reported that the shortage of weapons was the Republic's most serious concern:

Our immediate problem is to get arms as quickly as possible. It is not "only arms", but "arms above all else." The arms problem is the most critical because until now, the enemy received an abundance of arms and what we received was insignificant. We have already studied how to build something inside the nation. We tried something in the north, we studied the possibility of building arms in Barcelona and Madrid. We discussed the need to buy arms-building machines abroad. But it is clear that this would take a long time, and therefore, it is necessary to aid Spain not only by sending arms to the Spanish government, but above all by keeping arms from reaching the fascists... We need arms right now to address this situation. The enthusiasm of the Spanish popular movement is not just a phrase. The people are wholeheartedly with the government. For example, when we appealed for 5,000 militia members to go to the front, 50,000 appeared. Everywhere it is the same. We now have over 40,000 men in the barracks doing their military service, who are preparing while waiting for arms. We have even formed columns which should march on Andalucia, the north, etc. But it is always a question of arms. ⁴

Throughout September, the American journalist Louis Fischer claims to have regularly discussed the Republic's precarious position with the Soviet ambassador Rosenberg and the Pravda correspondent Kol'tsov, both of whom were in daily contact with either Stalin or Voroshilov. ⁵ It cannot be doubted that, as Pascua observed in early October 1936, the Soviet government was "perfectly aware of the military situation in Spain." ⁶

5

In either late August or early September, against a backdrop of dire predictions of the Republic's demise, the Soviet Union initiated preparations for military assistance. Stalin's decision to begin military aid to Republican Spain has been one of the most hotly-debated points in the entire historiography of the Spanish Civil War. A close examination of the recent scholarship of Iurii Ribalkin and Gerald Howson, coupled with a reading of declassified documents in several Moscow archives, brings us much closer to a satisfactory chronology

of the onset of military aid.

According to Colonel Iurii Ribalkin, whose groundbreaking research in the Military and Defense Commissariat archives has led many scholars to the key declassified documents related to Soviet military assistance, the initial plan to aid the Republic was prepared by the Defense Commissariat's head of military intelligence, Semen P. Uritskii, and the NKVD foreign section chief Abram Slutskii. ⁷ The blueprint for military assistance to the Republic was code-named "Operation X," and the plan was to be organized and implemented by a special NKVD intelligence sub-group code-named "Section X." ⁸ This group would carry out a large-scale clandestine operation that would facilitate the sale to Loyalist Spain of the Soviet Union's newest and best military equipment: the I-15 and I-16 fighter aircraft; the R-5, R-Z, and SSS ground-attack and reconnaissance aircraft; the SB-2 bomber; the T-26 light tank; the BT-5 fast (cavalry) tank; the BA-3 and BA-6 heavy armored cars; the BAFA-I light armored car; and torpedo patrol boats, artillery pieces of various calibers, mortars, machine guns, rifles, motorized vehicles, and torpedoes. Operation X would also dispatch to the Republic a large assortment of military specialists, including advisors, instructors, pilots, tankers, artillerymen, wireless operators, and code-breakers, as well as a large support staff of translators, medics, engineers, maintenance workers, and sailors.

For many years, secondary sources cited the 1939 memoir of Walter Krivitsky, which claimed that on 14 September the two NKVD officials assigned with preparing the operation presented their plan to Defense Commissar Kliment Voroshilov. ⁹ At the time, Stalin was on vacation in Sochi. In his report on the initial organization of Operation X, Voroshilov notes that on 26 September he informed Stalin by telephone of the first large-scale transfer of hardware:

26.9.36, 1500 hours, 45 min. I called comrade Stalin in Sochi and proposed to discuss these questions:

1. The sale of 80-100 "Vickers" system tanks [T-26] with the dispatch of the necessary quantity of maintenance personnel.
2. The sale via Mexico of 50-60 "SBs," [fighter aircraft] armed with foreign machine guns. Response urgently requested. KV. ¹⁰

That Stalin immediately approved the proposal is clear from the Defense Commissariat's cable to Sochi the following day, 27 September: "Preparing for dispatch 100 tanks, 387 specialists; sending 30 fighters without guns, and 15 planes fully equipped with crews and bombs. Ship to leave from Mexico for Cartagena. 50 tanks dispatched." ¹¹ At its session of 29 September, the Central Committee formally approved Operation X. In Stalin's absence, the session was led by L. Kaganovich and V. Molotov. ¹²

10

Reaching a satisfactory overview of the initial timeline requires further elaboration. Let us recall that detailed plans for Operation X were in place on 14 September. Given the scale of the project and the extensive plans proposed by Uritskii and Slutskii, one may reasonably conclude that Stalin's final decision was probably made several weeks prior to the release of the blueprint for Operation X; that is, some time before or around the first of September. ¹³ Interestingly, Aleksandr Orlov, allegedly the top NKVD officer in Spain, maintains that the decision to commence military aid occurred at the time of his appointment by the Politburo on 26 August, an assertion that would seem to refute Krivitsky's original claim that Stalin delayed until 14 September. ¹⁴ In fact, it is possible to reconcile both versions. Given the flurry of Kremlin appointments in mid-August, Orlov's claim that he was given the nod on 26 August is credible. Yet even if Stalin had ensured that a skeletal team would soon be on site in the Republic before the end of the month, the Defense Commissariat likely required additional time to prepare the detailed supply and logistical plans for the military operation. The blueprint, it seems, was ordered in the last week of August but not delivered until 14

September.

Though Operation X was carried out under the highest level of secrecy, and constituted an enormously complex clandestine military mission, it was also a legal commercial arrangement between two sovereign states: the Spanish Republic sought to purchase weaponry, and the Soviet Union subsequently agreed to sell. This point need not be belabored, but the myriad claims from many sides that the Kremlin poked its nose uninvited into the local Iberian conflict must be refuted in the strongest terms. ¹⁵ As in standard commercial relations, the Soviet dispatches of war materials and military advisors were directly in response to formal requests for assistance by the Spanish government. No weapons shipments were permitted to leave the Soviet Union before receiving governmental visas from Spanish representatives. ¹⁶ The Military Archive preserves two volumes of Spanish requests for weapons and military advisors. ¹⁷ These were typically delivered via diplomatic or intelligence channels. Spain's first appeal to the Soviet Union, it will be recalled, came on July 25, just one week after the uprising. ¹⁸

While the Republic had initially lobbied many dozens of states for military assistance, the events of August 1936 would soon force the Loyalist government to abandon any hope of effective aid from most viable sources. ¹⁹ With the signing of the Non-Intervention Agreement by twenty-seven European states—including, as we have seen, the Soviet Union—and the declaration of neutrality by the United States, efforts to win support concentrated more exclusively on the Russians. Bearing witness to this is the oft-quoted 21 December 1936 letter from Stalin, Molotov, and Voroshilov to Largo Caballero, which asserts that the provision of Soviet aid and advisors to Spain was in response to "repeated requests" from the Republic. ²⁰ The two volumes of preserved Spanish requests indicate that, while solicitations for assistance continued throughout the civil war, the most concentrated number were sent between 12 December 1936 and 30 January 1937, when the Republic sent Moscow twenty-six separate letters requesting arms. ²¹ The missives are varied in their requests—some quite bold, others modest. It is noteworthy that not everything requested was sent. Submarines, for example, repeatedly asked for, were never provided, nor were large Soviet transport ships, apart from those used in shipping weaponry. ²²

The modus operandi of initiating each weapons transfer proceeded in three steps. First, requests for arms were drafted by the Republic's premier or war minister and submitted to the Soviet ambassador or plenipotentiary, who then forwarded them to the Defense Commissariat in Moscow. Second, the commissariat, under Voroshilov's constant surveillance, prepared a shipping list in accordance with materials available. Finally, Voroshilov submitted to Stalin an itemized list for each shipment along with its total value. To be sure, the Soviet leader's role in the decision-making process governing Operation X was considerable. Illuminating the final and highest level of the approval stage of the operation is a letter from Voroshilov to Stalin from 2 November 1936:

Dear Koba! I am sending a letter of the property which, though it will hurt us, may be sold to the Spaniards.... If France cooperates, it will be possible for us to quickly transfer everything to site. You will see that the list is for a rather large number of weapons. This can be explained not only by the great needs of the Spanish army and artillery, but also because Kulik ²³ (in my opinion, rightly) decided to finally free ourselves of some foreign-made artillery—British, French and Japanese—totaling 280 pieces, or 28% of the weapons of the category in our artillery parks. The most painful of all will be sending off the aircraft, but this is needed more than anything else, and therefore it must be given. I request your approval (or orders), so that the loading at Murmansk may commence. Salutations. K. Voroshilov. I will inform you under separate cover of the value of the supplies, which comes to approximately 50 million dollars. ²⁴

Stalin himself was ultimately responsible for all weapons sent to Spain, a detail that was not lost on the Republic's leadership. Indeed, on occasion the Loyalists issued their requests directly to Stalin. ²⁵ At other times, the Soviet leader might choose to reduce a proposed amount he considered excessive or unnecessary. On such occasions, Stalin would send the weapons lists back to the Defense Commissariat with his trademark red-pencil slashes through the vetoed items. ²⁶ Nor was Stalin's involvement limited to approving weapons shipments. In a February 1937 meeting with Pascua, for example, Stalin expressed his disapproval of the Loyalist slogan "¡No pasarán!", which he found too passive and defeatist. ²⁷ Most researchers familiar with the Soviet primary documents agree that Stalin was intimately involved in most important facets of Operation X. ²⁸



II. The Logistics of Delivery

The safe transit of weapons from the Soviet Union to Spain presented numerous difficulties for the intelligence officials of Section X. The obstacles included the great distance involved in the passage, the large volume of arms being delivered, the inherent risks of the sea and land routes, and the need for complete secrecy. During the course of the civil war and for many years after, the Soviets' accomplishment in delivering so large a quantity of weapons under highly adverse conditions was, among journalists, historians, and casual observers alike, the subject of both admiration and dismay. Rumors circulated about the existence of a secret Soviet naval installation in the Mediterranean; others suggested that the Soviets had at their disposal a large fleet of special submarines. Certainly, Section X's highly successful and meticulously planned operation merits examination in some detail.

Following approval by Stalin, Defense Commissariat orders for weapons and military materials were sent to army warehouses without fixed recipient addresses or any other information that would indicate the shipments' ultimate destination. The work of loading materials onto rail cars was overseen by intelligence officers who then stayed with the cargo throughout its rail journey to the embarkation ports. ²⁹ Larger objects that could not be concealed in crates (tanks, planes, artillery guns) were disguised on rail cars as heavy industrial wares. As a decoy, the wagons themselves were typically marked with large signs reading "Vladivostok." At the same time, special misinformation agents leaked rumors that the cargoes were bound for the Far East. ³⁰

At port, the loaded rail cars were met by representatives of army intelligence and the central regime. During times when military materials were being loaded for Spain, heightened security descended on the port, and all tugboats, patrol boats, floating cranes, and dockworkers were carefully monitored by intelligence agents and specially appointed guards. ³¹ In late September 1936, as the transfer of weaponry went into full swing, the German chargé d'affaires in Moscow reported that "access to the harbor area has been more severely restricted since the summer months," and that "the old entrance permits have been annulled and replaced by new ones." ³² In a separate dispatch, the same functionary indicated that work at the harbor was being carried out exclusively under cover of night. ³³ The transport ships' crews, meanwhile, did not appear at the port until the last possible moment; upon their arrival, agents whisked them aboard and the ships immediately departed. ³⁴

As stipulated by the NKVD planners of Operation X, each shipment of arms was referred to as an *igrek* ("Y"). ³⁵ The first shipment carrying weapons to Spain was called *igrek-1*, the second *igrek-2*, and so forth. The total number of *igreks* sent to Spain is a point of debate among historians. According to the official Soviet publication, *Istoriia vtoroi mirovoi voyny*, sixty-six *igreks* were sent to Spain (52 in 1936-37; 13 in 1938; and 1 in 1939). ³⁶ Ribalkin confirms these figures, but Howson's research, also based on documents from the Military Archive, indicates a total of forty-eight successful deliveries, as well as three to seven

transports at the end of the war that never reached the Republic. ³⁷ The discrepancy between the two counts of shipments cannot at the present time be reconciled, and until further research can be completed in the Military Archive, it would be a mistake to speculate on the accuracy of either the Ribalkin or Howson numbers.

20

Nearly all Russian arms deliveries were shipped by sea from one of several Soviet ports. Only a handful of *igreks* originated in foreign countries, usually Mexico; from October 1936 to May 1937, they numbered only three. ³⁸ Each *igrek's* route was thoroughly prepared by Section X in Moscow, and as each ship traveled towards Spain a specialized disinformation plan was coordinated by military intelligence. ³⁹ The foremost priority in Section X was ensuring that German and Italian spies operating in Istanbul and the Bosphorus could not provide pro-Nationalist patrols off Spanish waters with precise descriptions of departing Soviet vessels. Elaborate schemes were thus hatched to alter as thoroughly as possible the appearance of each Soviet ship carrying arms and disguise it as a vessel from a neutral state. These diversionary tactics included painting a false name on the ship and repainting part of the hull. A foreign flag, specially supplied beforehand, was routinely raised as the ship passed out of Russian waters. In some cases, the ship's silhouette was changed by throwing up false sides, often to conceal the bulky weaponry sitting atop the upper decks. Aboard each ship were forged documents that supported all of these alterations. ⁴

Not only was the vessel's appearance changed, but the crew itself was also often disguised. On one journey the effect sought was of a vessel emerging from the Indian subcontinent: the watch and sailors on deck were outfitted in tropical garb, including a typical Indian marine helmet. Other boats mimicked leisure cruises for British aristocrats; sailors donned fancy evening-wear and slowly strolled the decks. ⁴¹ In a report to Soviet naval command, V. A. Alafusov, the captain of the *Cabo Santo Tomé*, described such a trip in early April 1937, during which well-dressed tourists conversed pleasantly on deck. "Who would imagine," he mused, "that this is the missing transport packed tight with bombers and missiles?" ⁴²

Geo-political considerations forced Section X planners to send Spanish-bound shipments via only two possible routes: south via the Black Sea and Mediterranean, or north through the Baltic and North Seas; no overland route was possible or ever considered. ⁴³ The two sea paths offered certain advantages but also posed unique problems. The southern route was used primarily between September 1936 and September 1937. By August 1937, Soviet intelligence agents reported that the entire route, from the Dardanelles to the Algerian coast, was controlled by Italian warships. ⁴⁴ The increasing dangers posed by the Fascist blockade and the Italo-Nationalist naval offensive soon forced the Soviets to abandon this route in favor of the northern one. ⁴⁵ For the better part of the first year of the war, however, the southern route proved effective. Between October 1936 and May 1937, twenty-four *igreks* were routed this way. ⁴⁶ Ships departed on the 3500-kilometer journey from one of four Black Sea ports (Sevastopol, Odessa, Kherson, or Feodosiia), passing through the Sea of Marmara, the Dardanelles, the Greek archipelago, and across the Mediterranean to Spain. As a rule, the most dangerous segments of transit, above all the passage from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, were undertaken at night. One captain [Alafusov] recalled that "... transports reduced speed in Marmara and then feigned engine trouble so that they would pass through the Dardanelles and Bosphorus at night...."



⁴⁷ Once safely in the Aegean, ships would call at one or another Greek isle, where final camouflaging, alterations, and flag raising would take place. ⁴⁸ From there, the transports followed a course far more southerly than normal shipping routes: south of Malta, through the Libyan Sea, and west around Cape Bon (Tunisia). From here, transports hugged the Algerian coast before departing, always via new routes, to Cartagena. ⁴⁹ After autumn 1937, several arriving *igreks* called at Marseilles, whence the cargo continued by rail to the Spanish border.



The northern route, used for only three *igreks* during the first nine months of Operation X, ⁵⁰ was after autumn 1937 the principal conduit for ferrying arms from the USSR to the Republic. ⁵¹ Leaving the Russian ports of Leningrad, Kronstadt, or Murmansk, ships sailed the Baltic and North Seas to the French ports of Le Havre, Cherbourg, or Bordeaux. From French territory, the cargo continued to the border by rail. Until the fall of northern Spain in October 1937, the few *igreks* sent via the northern route proceeded directly to Bilbao.

The northern route presented many complications not encountered in the Black, Marmara, or Mediterranean Seas. First, although Section X preferred when possible to employ Spanish merchant vessels to ship weaponry, the Spanish Republic had very few appropriate ships at its disposal in the seas off Eastern and Northern Europe. Second, sailing via the Baltic from Leningrad was made difficult due to the necessity of avoiding the German coast; captains could not navigate the Kiel canal, but instead had to go the long way around Denmark, adding days to the voyage. ⁵² Third, in both the North Sea and the Bay of Biscay, ships were often hit by protracted gales, threatening the cargo and testing the courage and skills of captain and crew alike. ⁵³ The *Andreev*, for example, during a voyage from Leningrad to Bilbao (22 October-13 November 1936), was so battered by wind and seas that the Defense Commissariat decided that the conditions equaled those of war. The captain and officers later learned that the Commissariat had distinguished them with battle honors. ⁵⁴

25

In the spring of 1938, the obstacles involved in shipping via the northern route were at least partially offset by a new development. Bowing to domestic and international pressure, the Blum government in Paris formally re-opened the French frontier with Spain. The borders were again closed several months later, but from March until June 1938, the Spanish Republic was able to receive weapons via France. ⁵⁵ Of course, this was a rather disingenuous move by the French, as the Republic's fortunes were in obvious eclipse at this time, and the Soviets could not be expected to reinvigorate an aid program that had dropped off considerably since the previous summer. Moreover, the French, like most international observers, would have been aware of the increasing technological superiority of the rebels' weaponry, which by then was making quick work of even the most advanced Soviet tanks and planes, thus rendering practically moot the open-border policy.

Even before this official shift in policy in spring 1938, some authorities in France occasionally allowed shipments to be moved across French territory, but the Soviets were not always quick to take advantage of these opportunities. On 1 September 1937, Pascua wrote Voroshilov, imploring him to switch to the northern route via France, but no alteration of route was forthcoming. ⁵⁶ Nearly two months later, Pascua sent the following letter to the Defense Commissariat:

Señor Prieto, the Minister of National Defense, has requested that I make known to the Soviet government with the greatest urgency that the French government has selected the port of Bassens, near Bordeaux, for the unloading of war materials, and has guaranteed their transport as far as the rail station at Puigcerdá (Spain), where at present the installations are being improved and made adequate. This agreement by the French government will permit, without risks, the transport of Soviet war materials from the USSR's northern ports. ⁵⁷

Although this route offered a considerable respite from the conditions of the first half of 1937, access across the French frontier hardly solved the Republic's military supply difficulties. One problem became apparent only upon unloading a shipment of disassembled bomber aircraft: the unwieldy containers holding the airplane parts would not fit on French rail cars. With some inconvenience, Soviet agents scrambled to move the containers to an airfield, where the aircraft were reassembled and, after the arrival of competent crews, delivered by air to Spain. ⁵⁸

The French themselves caused a more intractable problem. According to Ivan Maiskii, the transit of Soviet weapons through France was accompanied by myriad bureaucratic snafus and complications. French conservatives went to great pains to ensure that weapons passing through their country proceeded at the slowest pace possible. The entire process was hampered by what Maiskii referred to as "the incredible corruption of the entire French governmental apparatus." ⁵⁹ Elsewhere the Soviet ambassador wrote that, "The French-Spanish border, generally speaking, is passable given a certain amount of caution and a certain amount of grease." ⁶⁰

30

In Moscow, meanwhile, the Republican ambassador Pascua wrote of his "constant preoccupation with the uncertainties of passage through France." ⁶¹ Kuznetsov, the Soviet naval attaché to the Republic, claimed that the Spaniards were required to pay considerable bribes to French officials in order to ensure that weapons were allowed across the border. ⁶² On occasion, even the passing of large sums to greedy French officials did not hasten the transfer of weaponry. In a report to the Defense Commissariat, Shtern claimed that in December 1936 the French seized thirty-three aircraft bound for the Republic and did not release them until September of the following year. ⁶³ Indeed, the French ambassador to Madrid had confirmed the same to his American counterpart in autumn 1936, insisting that, since the creation of the Non-Intervention Agreement, no war material purchased in Russia had passed through France. ⁶⁴ The zeal with which the French sought to prevent the free passage of arms to the Republic reached new levels in late summer 1937, when the Loyalist air force sought to evacuate Soviet fighter squadrons from the rapidly shrinking northern front to friendlier terrain in the east. According to the Republican pilot Francisco Tarazona, the removal of the machines could only be carried out through risky air evacuation over rebel territory; earlier attempts to transport men and planes over French soil had resulted in the internment of the former, and the confiscation of the latter. ⁶⁵

Regardless of route, ships carrying weapons to Spain were subject to extraordinary security measures. Despite the constant threat of search or attack, Soviet weapons shipments were only accompanied by Republican naval escorts in the final stage of the journey; otherwise the vessels were on their own. ⁶⁶ To mitigate these risks, on board each *igrek* was a special military intelligence team, consisting of wireless operators and code senders. Twice a day, always at different times and intervals, the ship's communications team would send coded messages to NKVD headquarters, apprising Moscow of their position and the conditions of transit.

Further strengthening of security measures occurred after German and Italian planes and warships attacked and sank several Spanish merchant vessels carrying non-military goods. In his memoir of the war, Kuznetsov reported that enemy attacks on Soviet shipping were a constant concern. ⁶⁷ In the late fall of 1936, Section X began outfitting each *igrek* with defensive weapons. Ships were typically given six to eight anti-aircraft guns and a modest supply of anti-submarine depth charges. ⁶⁸ In September 1937, the Republican government urgently requested that the Soviets begin arming Spanish merchant ships prior to their return trip to the Mediterranean. ⁶⁹ In response to this request, the *Cabo Santo Tomé* was fitted with eight machine-guns, four 75-mm guns, and four 45-mm guns. ⁷⁰

The ships deployed in Operation X included Soviet, Spanish, and chartered foreign vessels. Since Nationalist naval patrols were constantly on the lookout for Soviet ships, Section X planners had good reason to prefer Spanish or other foreign boats. In practice, however, this proved difficult, and in the end more than one-third of all military shipments to Spain traveled aboard Soviet vessels. In the period from the start of Operation X to May 1937, eleven Soviet, fourteen Spanish, and three third-country ships participated, with several working more than one voyage. ⁷¹ Among the Soviet vessels used in Operation X were the *Komsomol*, *KEM*, *Stari Bolshevik*, *Volgoles*, *Karl Lenin*, *Andreev*, *Blagoev*, *Chicherin*, and *Ordgonidze*. ⁷²

For ships traveling the southern route, an especially dangerous stage of the journey was the final stretch into Cartagena. The first several *igrek*s arrived in the Spanish port with no military escort at all; only a launch pilot was on hand to steer the ships into the proper moorage. ⁷³ By early November 1936, however, heavily armed craft from the Republican navy met the ships off the Algerian coast and escorted them to port. This meeting required considerable advance planning and precautions to ensure its safe execution. The exact location of a given ship off the Algerian coast was known only to Section X planners in Moscow. The day prior to the ship's arrival at the appointed coordinates, Moscow would notify the Soviet military advisor at Cartagena, providing a precise description of the vessel, the nationality of its flag, and the names of its commander and crew. ⁷⁴ The Cartagena advisor would then organize an escort team selected from the Republican navy to meet the craft. The rendezvous was typically in open waters, 60-80 miles southeast of Cartagena. ⁷⁵ Kuznetsov, who was often charged with this responsibility, recalls considerable drama and trepidation surrounding the preparation of these clandestine operations. Not only did the escort commander fear an enemy attack during the convoy, but it also was not always certain that the Republican naval craft would be sufficiently armed to repel an ambush at sea. ⁷⁶

35

The safe arrival in Cartagena of a ship carrying weapons did not close the book on that particular *igrek*. Unloading the vessel, too, presented considerable risks and logistical problems. To begin with, Republican commanders and regulars proved incapable of keeping the presence of Soviet arms secret. According to Kuznetsov, "secrecy in the activities in Cartagena appeared to be a hopeless affair." ⁷⁷ This was in part due to the halfhearted security measures employed by the Soviets themselves, who within Spain usually communicated on open telephone lines. Indeed, Kuznetsov recalls that news of the arrival of arms in Cartagena was often relayed to the chief Soviet military advisor in Valencia with a coded announcement such as: "Tomorrow I begin my trip." ⁷⁸ In any case, from the moment a ship arrived in port, if not before, the news quickly spread throughout the city and beyond. Among those who learned of the arms shipments were often Nationalist agents operating around the port, and these wasted no time in alerting Salamanca or Burgos. As a result, the Nationalist air force routinely bombarded the port.

The frequency of these bombing raids, carried out sometimes by day but more often by night, sharply increased after the September 1937 Nyon Conference. ⁷⁹ Only after Nyon did British and French warships patrol the Mediterranean, and Italian naval craft could no longer search or destroy with impunity vessels suspected of ferrying arms. The new Nationalist tactic called for concentrated bombing campaigns on the exposed Republican ports, primarily Cartagena. According to the research of a Soviet historian, in September 1937 Franco carried out 19 raids on the city; in October, 70; in November, 44; in December, 47; and in the first six months of 1938, 670. ⁸⁰ Certainly, Franco had ordered raids on the port since he first learned that the city was critical to the Republic's weapons supply. As early as December 1936, Voroshilov reported to Stalin on the dangerous conditions under which Russian sailors were working at the port:

...[N]early all our ships have had the work of unloading the cargoes at port carried out under conditions of bombing ... by enemy aircraft. The ships' crews, in their devotion to, appreciation of the importance of, and responsibility to the assigned task, have assisted in guaranteeing the operation and preserving the cargo at times of attack during the journey. ... Our crews have not only worked in an exemplary fashion unloading the ships, but they have displayed the behavior, maturity and discipline which makes them worthy and courageous fighting sons of our socialist country. ⁸¹

The increased bombing of ports, as much as the improved access across the French border, convinced Section X in the fall of 1937 to altogether abandon the southern route.

If Soviet memoirists are to be believed, the ships ferrying arms to Spain were met by sloppy, inept, or even negligent Loyalist dockworkers. In Kuznetsov's account, these workers carelessly handled barrels of gas and tossed around boxes of ammunition with no sense of possible consequences. ⁸² The naval attaché was dismayed that the unloaded shipments of fighters, tanks, cannons, and rifles often sat exposed on the docks with little or no protection. More than once, Kuznetsov claims to have witnessed anarcho-syndicalist groups absconding with portions of the weaponry. Finally, even once unloaded and placed aboard rail cars, the Soviet hardware was rarely expedited to where it was needed; the Republic did not possess sufficient locomotives to carry the rolling stock to the front. ⁸³

40

Despite the numerous obstacles and difficulties inherent in the transit stage of Operation X, sixty-four out of the total sixty-six *igreks* (using Ribalkin's numbers) reached their appointed destinations. ⁸⁴ In all, the Soviets delivered to Spain something on the order of 600,000 tons of war matériel. ⁸⁵ According to one Russian researcher, during the whole of Operation X, only two ships carrying Soviet arms encountered problems sufficient to force serious alterations of their routes. One *igrek* was attacked by enemy aircraft not far from the Spanish coast and only with difficulty managed to reach the shoreline near Valencia and safely unload its cargo. The other ship, unable to break through the blockade of Spanish waters, called instead at Algiers and weapons were unloaded there. ⁸⁶

This safe record of delivery, however, does little to indicate the considerable dangers these vessels faced in Spanish waters during the civil war. Potemkin, the Commissar for Foreign Affairs, reported that from October 1936 to April 1937 there were eighty-four cases of Soviet vessels detained by rebel ships: seventy-four in the Gibraltar straits, five off the northwest coast of Spain, and five in the Mediterranean. ⁸⁷ One Soviet ship,



the *Smidovich*, had its cargo confiscated by the rebels.

⁸⁸ Three others, the *Komsomol*, ⁸⁹ *Timiriázev*, and *Blagoev*, ⁹⁰ were sunk.

Soviet authorities at the time insisted that none of these was carrying materials of war at the time of their sinking; that is, none was an *igrek*. ⁹¹ By any reckoning, the Soviets had a significant amount of luck in getting weapons to Spain. Consider the following: between the end of September and November

1936, the Soviets sent seventeen *igreks* to Spain, ten of these aboard Soviet vessels. ⁹²

During nearly the same period—October to November 1936—the Nationalist navy detained and searched twelve Soviet vessels, yet not a single *igrek* was among them. All seventeen shipments of arms reached their destinations safely. ⁹³

Non-Soviet craft fared more poorly. From the beginning of the war until the end of 1937, the Nationalists and their naval allies sunk 125 craft, including 48 English, 30 Spanish, and 9 French vessels. ⁹⁴ Shipments of arms from countries other than the USSR also had a lower success rate. According to reports in Moscow's Military Archive, between October and December 1937, six of the seven Spanish ships carrying arms purchased by Mexico in Poland were sunk or captured. ⁹⁵

What accounts for the Soviets' success rate during the supply stage of Operation X? Most of the participants who commented on the operation agreed, perhaps predictably, that its smooth execution was in no small measure due to the meticulous planning of Section X and the skill of the crews selected. In his report to Uritskii, the captain of the *Komsomol* reported that "the journey proceeded precisely, accurately and quickly. The unloading of equipment and flammable cargo was carried out by competent staff ... without accident or publicity." ⁹⁶ The tank commander Krivoshein, himself aboard the *Komsomol* on her first journey, confirmed this assessment, singling out the "excellent and selfless" work of the crew and commanders. ⁹⁷ In terms of guaranteeing the secrecy of the missions, the extreme precautions insisted on by Section X gave each *igrek* an advantage over the more hastily prepared voyages of some other foreign-sponsored supply missions. The success rate

is even more remarkable when one considers Kuznetsov's claim that the Soviet Navy at the time was essentially inadequate to the task, burdened by archaic vessels and possessing weak air defenses. [98](#)

Kuznetsov's judgment notwithstanding, the Soviet Navy must be afforded some credit for its performance in Operation X. Contrary to the assertions of at least one historian, the navy appears to have acquitted itself well. [98](#) Moreover, when compared to the many egregious military failures that characterized much of the Soviet assistance to the Republic, to say nothing of Stalin's more insidious campaigns on the domestic front, the transport of weaponry to Spain from the USSR must be seen as a remarkable achievement.

Notes:

Note 1: Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History; hereafter, RGASPI) (formerly Rossiiskii Tsentr Khraneniia i Izucheniiia Dokumentov Noveishei Istorii (RTsKhIDNI)), f. 495, op. 18, del. 1101, l. 29. [Back.](#)

Note 2: Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Voennyi Arkhiv (RGVA), f. 33987, op. 3, del. 845, l. 14, 17-18, 40; del. 848, l. 109. Cited in Ribalkin, *Operatsiia "X": Sovetskaia voennaia pomoshch' respublikanskoi Ispanii (1936-1939)* (Moscow: "AIRO-XX", 2000), 26. [Back.](#)

Note 3: RGASPI, f. 17, op. 120, del. 266, l. 24. [Back.](#)

Note 4: Report of Codavilla, 22 Sept. 1936, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 2, del. 233, ll. 56-99. [Back.](#)

Note 5: Louis Fischer, *Men and Politics* (London: Cape, 1941), 370. [Back.](#)

Note 6: Pascua to Caballero, 9 Oct. 1936. AHN-Madrid. Diversos. M. Pascua, Caja 1, exp. 19, 2. [Back.](#)

Note 7: According to Louis Fischer, Uritskii alone was responsible for all aspects of Operation X. See *Men and Politics*, 405. [Back.](#)

Note 8: Institut Voennoi Istorii (IVI). Dokumenty i materialy. Inventorii 6408, L. 1. Cited in Iurii E. Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch' Sovetskogo Soiuzu ispanskomu narodu v natsional'no-revoliutsionnoi voine 1936-1939," Ph.D. diss. (Institute of Military History, Moscow, 1992), 79. [Back.](#)

Note 9: See Walter Krivitsky, *In Stalin's Secret Service* (New York: Harper, 1939), 82-84. The same date is cited in Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch'," 79; Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution in Spain, 1936-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 220-21; and Gerald Howson, *Arms for Spain* (New York: Murray, 1998), 124-26. Antonio Elorza and Marta Bizcarrondo, *Queridos Camaradas: La Internacional Comunista y España, 1919-1939* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1999), 314. [Back.](#)

Note 10: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 852, l. 138-141; cited in Ribalkin, *Operatsiia "X,"* 28-9. [Back.](#)

Note 11: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 852, ll. 140-141. [Back.](#)

Note 12: Institut Voennoi Istorii (IVI). Dokumenty i materialy. Inventorii 6408, L. 1. Cited in Ribalkin, *Operatsiia "X,"* 41. The 29 September approval date is also discussed, without archival reference, in Oleg Sarin and Lev Dvoretzky, *Alien Wars: The Soviet Union's Aggressions Against the World, 1919-1989* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1996), 2. [Back.](#)

Note 13: Of the Russian scholars who have studied the documentary evidence since the opening of the federal archives, none give precise data regarding Stalin's decision. V. A. Tolmachae, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniia: Opyt i uroki internatsional'noi pomoshchi (1936-1939)," Ph.D. diss. (Leningrad, 1991), does not discuss the issue at all; Ribalkin mentions only the 14 September delivery of the NKVD operational blueprint to Voroshilov (*Operatsiia "X,"* 79). The Russian historian M. V. Novikov concurs with the present study, opting for the non-specific "beginning of September" as the best guess for Stalin's earliest orders to begin military assistance. See *SSSR, Komintern i grazhdanskaia voina v Ispanii 1936-1939*, 2 vols. (Iaroslav: Iaroslavskii gos. pedagogicheskii universitet, 1995), vol. II: 44. Of the many Western writers who have discussed the problem without the benefit of primary evidence, most, like Hugh Thomas, estimate early September as the starting time. See *The Spanish Civil War*, 3rd ed. rev. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 262-63. Stanley Payne, in *The Spanish Revolution* (New York: Norton, 1970), gives some credence to Nationalist propagandists who claimed that Soviet arms had arrived as early as July (264-65). It is also worth noting that Walter Krivitsky, the often doubted and much maligned Soviet defector who claimed that Stalin's decision to aid the Republic was finalized on 14 September, appears now to be vindicated (*In Stalin's Secret Service*, 82-4). Louis Fischer, meanwhile, is badly off the mark, claiming that Stalin's decision was not made until the first week of October (*Men and Politics*, 370). [Back.](#)

Note 14: Aleksandr Orlov, "Answers to the Questionnaire of Prof. S. G. Payne" (unpublished, 1968), 1-3. [Back.](#)

Note 15: The issue is rarely addressed directly in the literature. Among the few exceptions is the American ambassador to Madrid, who notes that, "Russia began selling tanks and planes to the loyalists—but it *sold* them, did not give them." Emphasis in the original. See Claude Bowers, *My Mission to Spain: Watching the Rehearsal for World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 315. [Back.](#)

Note 16: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 835, l. 52. [Back.](#)

Note 17: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 960, ll. 193-229. [Back.](#)

Note 18: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 960, l. 219. [Back.](#)

Note 19: The Republic's desperate and eventually unsuccessful attempts to buy significant amounts of weapons in Western Europe are treated expertly, and in detail, in Howson, *Arms for Spain*. [Back.](#)

Note 20: The famous letter appeared in the Soviet official history of the Spanish Civil War, *Voina i revoliutsiia v Ispanii 1936-1939*, 6 vols. (Moscow, 1966-1977), vol I: 419-20. This series also appeared in a Spanish translation: Dolores Ibárruri, et al., *Guerra y revolución en España 1936-1939*, 4 vols. (Moscow: Progreso, 1967). According to Ribalkin, the original document is preserved in the Defense archive: Tsentralnyi Arkhiv Ministerstva Oborony (TsAMO). F. 132, op. 2642, del. 192, l. 1. See Ribalkin, *Operatsiia "X,"* 48-49. [Back.](#)

Note 21: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 960, l. 198. [Back.](#)

Note 22: Nikolai G. Kuznetsov, *Memoirs of Wartime Minister of the Navy* (Moscow: Progreso, 1990), 75. The Republic's inability to obtain naval reinforcements was a major factor in Nationalist dominance of the seas. Curiously, few post-war criticisms of the Soviet Union have cited Moscow's refusal to provide battleships or cruisers to the Republic. [Back.](#)

Note 23: G. Kulik was the Soviet advisor to General Sebastian Pozas, who himself was a member of the PCE and PSUC and commander of the Central Front, and after May 1937 commander of Catalonia and the Army of the Levant. [Back.](#)

Note 24: TsAMO, f. 119, op. 663, del. 1, l. 22. Cited in Ribalkin, *Operatsiia "X,"* 30. The letter also appears in Howson, *Arms for Spain*, 127, with Ribalkin cited as the source. [Back.](#)

Note 25: See Negrín 's 27 Apr. 1937 telegram to Stalin, delivered through Pascua, regarding the procedure for transporting military materials in newly purchased boats. AHN-Madrid. Diversos. Marcelino Pascua, Leg. 2, Exp. 4-1. [Back.](#)

Note 26: TsAMO, f. 119, op. 663, del. 1, ll. 23-25. Cited in Ribalkin, *Operatsiia "X,"* 30. The author published the same material in *Ejercito* (Jan. 1992): 44-5. Howson also cites the above quotation (*Arms for Spain*, 127). It should be noted that the shipment left not from Murmansk, as Voroshilov suggests, but from the Black Sea port of Feodosiia. Shipments from Murmansk commenced only in fall 1937. [Back.](#)

Note 27: Notes of meeting with Stalin, Molotov, and Voroshilov, 3 Feb. 1937. AHN-Madrid. Diversos. Marcelino Pascua, Leg. 2, Exp. 6. [Back.](#)

Note 28: M. T. Meshcheriakov, for example, claims that, "practically not one document on the Spanish question escaped his [Stalin's] attention. "SSSR i grazhdanskaia voina v Ispanii," *Otechestvennaia istoriia* 3 (1993): 87. [Back.](#)

Note 29: Ribalkin, *Operatsiia "X,"* 30. [Back.](#)

Note 30: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 832, l. 162. [Back.](#)

Note 31: TsAMO, f. 16, op. 3148, del. 5, l. 21. Cited in Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch' Sovetskogo Soiuzu ispanskomu narodu v natsionalno-revolutsionnoi voine 1936-1939," Ph.D. diss. (Institute of Military History, Moscow, 1992), 82. [Back.](#)

Note 32: Von Tippelskirch to the German Foreign Ministry, 28 Sept. 1936; in *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, III, Series C (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1957), 100. Hereafter DGFP. [Back.](#)

Note 33: Von Tippelskirch to the German Foreign Ministry, 13 Nov. 1936; DGFP, 128. [Back.](#)

Note 34: TsAMO, f. 132, op. 2642, del. 83, l. 37; cited in Ribalkin, *Operatsiia "X,"* 38. [Back.](#)

Note 35: The designation *igrek*, though a code name for each of Moscow's military shipments, was never kept as secret as planners might have wished. On this issue Kuznetsov has the following to say: "The Komsomol was followed by other vessels. We referred to them as "Ys" as if to emphasize the need for strict secrecy. However, secrets often leaked out. And high standing officials were mostly to blame for such leakages." See Kuznetsov, *Memoirs of Wartime Minister of the Navy*, 64. [Back.](#)

Note 36: *Istoriia vtoroi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: Voennoe izdat. Ministerstva Oborony SSSR, 1974), II: 54. [Back.](#)

Note 37: Howson, *Arms for Spain*, 13-31 and 278-303. [Back.](#)

Note 38: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 893, l. 231. [Back.](#)

Note 39: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 870, ll. 341-342; del. 961, l. 166; f. 35082, op. 1, del. 18, ll. 49, 64-66. For a discussion of the *igrek* system, see also M. T. Meshcheriakov, "Sovetskii Soiuz i antifashistskaia voina ispanskogo naroda (1936-1939)," *Istoriia SSSR* 1 (Jan.-Feb.1988): 30. [Back.](#)

Note 40: For official reports relating to measures taken at sea, see RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 961, l. 166; del. 870, ll. 341-342; f. 35082, op. 1, del. 18. L. 49, 64-66. These are supported by several memoir accounts, including A. Vetrov, *Voluntery svobody* (Moscow: Voennoe izdat., 1972), 26-28; and the same author's "Bronevoi shchit respublikanskoi Ispanii," in *Problemy ispanskoi istorii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1971), 249-50. All of these sources confirm Walter Krivitsky's long-doubted account of the Soviets' transfer of arms through the Mediterranean. See "Stalin's Hand in Spain," *Saturday Evening Post*, April 15, 1939,

116. [Back.](#)

Note 41: *Voina v Ispanii. Vyp. 15. Deistviia morskogo flota na kommunikatsiikh* (Moscow: Gos. voennoe izdat., 1938), 18. Cited in Ribalkin, *Operatsiia "X,"* 38. [Back.](#)

Note 42: Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Voenno-Morskogo Flota (RGAVMF), f. 1529, op. 1, del. 147, l. 56. [Back.](#)

Note 43: For discussions of Soviet shipping routes to Spain, see Ribalkin, *Operatsiia "X,"* 223; Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniia," 94-95; Novikov, *SSSR, Komintern i grazhdanskaia*, vol. II, 49. [Back.](#)

Note 44: Archivo del Comité Central del Partido Comunista Española - Madrid (CC PCE). Tesis y manuscritos. 19/11, no. 21, 184. The original is at RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 961, ll. 177-184. [Back.](#)

Note 45: Abandonment of the southern route was precipitated more specifically by the sinking of two Soviet vessels in the Mediterranean by Italian submarines. These ships were not, however, *igreks*. The *Timiriazev*, whose cargo was coal, was sunk on 30 August 1937, 120 km east of Algiers; the *Blagoev*, which carried construction materials, on 1 September 1937, 15 km from the Greek island Skiros. For a full account of these events, see NKID Commissar Potemkin's 5 September 1937 telegram to the Soviet chargé d'affaires in Rome, reprinted in *Dokumenty Vneshnei Politiki SSSR* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1977), vol. XX: 487-88. [Back.](#)

Note 46: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 893, l. 231. [Back.](#)

Note 47: RGAVMF, f. 1529, op. 1, d. 147, l. 60. [Back.](#)

Note 48: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 961, ll. 155-156. [Back.](#)

Note 49: Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch'," 84. [Back.](#)

Note 50: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 893, l. 231. Of these three shipments, two originated in Leningrad and delivered their cargo to northern Spain; the third sailed from Murmansk to France. [Back.](#)

Note 51: According to Ribalkin ("Voennaia pomoshch'," 85), as early as October 1936 Voroshilov had proposed to Stalin using the northern route exclusively, but the idea was vetoed. [Back.](#)

Note 52: TsAMO, f. 16, op. 3148, del. 5, ll. 24-25; cited in Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch'," 85. [Back.](#)

Note 53: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 961, ll. 155-156. Cited in M. V. Novikov, *SSSR, Komintern i grazhdanskaia*, 49. [Back.](#)

Note 54: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 870, l. 237. [Back.](#)

Note 55: France's sealing of its border with Spain, which took place on 13 June 1938, was the result of various factors, including the new Daladier government's desire for rapprochement with Italy, French industrial demand for Spanish pyrites mined in Nationalist-held territory and, perhaps most important, intense British pressure to make non-intervention a reality. For an in-depth discussion of the problem, see Michael Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994), 160-67. [Back.](#)

Note 56: AHN. Diversos. Marcelino Pascua, Leg. 2. Exp. 8. [Back.](#)

Note 57: Pascua to Voroshilov, 21 Oct. 1937. AHN. Diversos. Marcelino Pascua, Leg. 2. Exp. 7-1. [Back.](#)

- Note 58:** TsAMO, f. 16, op. 3148, del. 5, ll. 24-25. Cited in Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch'," 85. [Back.](#)
- Note 59:** Ivan Maiskii, *Vospominaniia sovetskogo diplomata - 1925-1945* (Moscow: Nauka, 1971), 400. [Back.](#)
- Note 60:** Maiskii to Voroshilov, 25 Feb. 1938. RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1148, l. 55. [Back.](#)
- Note 61:** AHN. Diversos. Marcelino Pascua, Leg. 2. Exp. 2, 48. The sentiment is repeated in other telegrams to his government. See Leg. 2. Exp. 2, 44. [Back.](#)
- Note 62:** N. G. Kuznetsov, *Na dalekom meridiane* (Moscow: Nauka, 1988), 163-64. [Back.](#)
- Note 63:** Archivo de la Comité Central del Partido Comunista de España (CC PCE), Tesis et Manuscritos, 19/10, no. 17,169. The report appears in RGVA as f. 33987, op. 3, del. 961, ll. 131-175. [Back.](#)
- Note 64:** Bowers, *My Mission to Spain*, 314. [Back.](#)
- Note 65:** Francisco Tarazona, *Yo fui piloto de caza rojo* (Madrid: Fermín Uriarte, 1968), 40. [Back.](#)
- Note 66:** For a discussion of the lack of intelligence and security measures available to ships sailing to Spain, see Kuznetsov, *Na dalekom meridiane*, 124-36. [Back.](#)
- Note 67:** Kuznetsov, *Na dalekom meridiane*, 125 and 165. [Back.](#)
- Note 68:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 961, l. 165; f. 35082, op. 1, del. 18, l. 13. [Back.](#)
- Note 69:** Pascua to Voroshilov, 1 Sept. 1937. AHN. Diversos. Marcelino Pascua, Leg. 2. Exp. 8. [Back.](#)
- Note 70:** *Voina v Ispanii. Vyp. 15. Deistviia morskogo flota na kommunikatsiakh*, 15. Cited in Ribalkin, *Operatsiia "X,"* 41. [Back.](#)
- Note 71:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 893, l. 231. [Back.](#)
- Note 72:** Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniia," 88-89. [Back.](#)
- Note 73:** Ibid. [Back.](#)
- Note 74:** Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch'," 86. [Back.](#)
- Note 75:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 961, l. 166. [Back.](#)
- Note 76:** Kuznetsov, *Nakanune*, 154-55. [Back.](#)
- Note 77:** Kuznetsov, *Na dalekom meridiane*, 125. [Back.](#)
- Note 78:** Kuznetsov, "Con los marinos," 175. [Back.](#)
- Note 79:** The Nyon Conference, held in a Swiss town near Geneva, was called by Britain and France to establish rules for the protection of neutral vessels in the Mediterranean from attack by German, Italian, or Nationalist aircraft and naval vessels. The event that precipitated the calling of the conference was the mistaken attack by the Italian torpedo boat *Iride* on the HMS *Havock* on 30 August 1937. All states bordering the Mediterranean were invited to the conference, which began on 10 September. The Soviet Union and Germany were also invited to attend. Since the meeting was organized principally to deal with threats from Rome and Berlin, both the Germans and Italians refused to participate. The agreement divided protection of the Mediterranean into eastern and western sections,

Malta being the dividing line. The Russians and Italians were charged with patrolling points east, the British and French points west. Details are taken up in Thomas, *Spanish Civil War*, 741-42, and Brian Sullivan, "Fascist Italy's Military Involvement in the Spanish Civil War," *Journal of Military History* 59:4 (Oct. 1995): 716. [Back.](#)

Note 80: M. T. Meshcheriakov, "Sovetskii Soiuz i antifashistskaia voina ispanskogo naroda (1936-1939)," *Istoriia SSSR* 1 (Jan.-Feb.1988): 30. [Back.](#)

Note 81: RGVA, op. 3, del. 870, l. 341. [Back.](#)

Note 82: Kuznetsov, *Na dalekom meridiane*, 126. [Back.](#)

Note 83: *Ibid.*, 128. [Back.](#)

Note 84: Not a few historians and memoirists, especially Spanish, maintain that during the course of the civil war many ships ferrying Soviet military supplies were sunk. See for example, Enrique Líster, *Memorias de una luchador. Los primeros combates* (Madrid: Toro, 1977), 160-61. No archival evidence supports these claims, though to be sure, many Republican vessels were sunk and, as we have seen, several Soviet vessels carrying humanitarian aid were also sunk. [Back.](#)

Note 85: *Istoriia vtoroi mirovoi voiny*, vol. II, 54, 137. [Back.](#)

Note 86: Meshcheriakov, "Sovetskii Soiuz i antifashistskaia," 30. It should be noted that Meshcheriakov's calculations evidently do not take into account the final attempted deliveries, which left the USSR in December 1938, and whose fate remains uncertain. [Back.](#)

Note 87: *DVP SSSR*, vol. XX, 226. [Back.](#)

Note 88: *Ibid.* The sinking of the *Komsomol* on 14 December 1936 was one of the most famous events (thanks to Soviet and Spanish propaganda efforts) in the whole of the Spanish Civil War; of those associated with the Soviet participation, it was perhaps *the* event. The *Komsomol* incident on the one hand galvanized fascist and rebel resolve to eliminate perceived Communist and/or Soviet intervention in Spain; on the other hand, for Soviet citizens, Spanish loyalists, and above all the PCE, it served as a symbol of fascist atrocities. One's point of view largely hinged on what cargo one believed the *Komsomol* carried when she went down on her third voyage to Spain—i.e., non-military or military supplies—and whether or not she was sunk by the Nationalist cruiser *Canarias* or was scuttled by her captain. Since the event, each side in the debate has persistently clung to dogmatic conclusions. Although the ship certainly had carried arms before its sinking—it had brought the second shipment of Soviet arms into Cartagena on 12 October 1936—to date, no Russian archival evidence has been produced to suggest that on its last voyage the *Komsomol* was classed as an *igrek*. For a detailed treatment of the debate and its bibliography, see Michael Alpert, *La guerra civil en el mar* (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1987), 183-97; Juan García Durán, "El hundamiento del "Komsomol"," *Tiempo de Historia* 3:34 (Sept. 1977); and the same author's "Guerre Civile Espagnole 1936-1939. Interventions étrangères sùr mer," Ph.D. diss. (La Sorbonne, 1975), 310-13. [Back.](#)

Note 89: *DVP SSSR*, vol. XX, 487-88. [Back.](#)

Note 90: Since the *Komsomol* had earlier ferried arms, one cannot dismiss the possibility that she was doing so at the time of her sinking; in any case, no new evidence has surfaced to prove the point either way. [Back.](#)

Note 91: According to documents in RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 870, ll. 341-343, the ten Soviet ships were the *Komsomol*, *Staryi Bolshevik*, *KEM*, *Volgoles*, *Karl Lenin*, *Andreev*, *Kursk*, *Blagoev*, *Chicherin*, and the tanker *Sergo Ordjzonikidze*. [Back.](#)

Note 92: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 870, ll. 341-343. [Back.](#)

Note 93: *Mirovoe khoziaistvo i mirovaia politika* 9 (1938): 199-200. Cited in Ribalkin, *Operatsiia "X,"* 42. [Back.](#)

Note 94: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 960, l. 138. [Back.](#)

Note 95: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 832, l. 193. [Back.](#)

Note 96: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 832, l. 192. [Back.](#)

Note 97: Kuznetsov, *Memoirs of Wartime Minister of the Navy*, 8; Nakanune, 287-88. [Back.](#)

Note 98: With regard to its role in the civil war, Willard Frank has been the Soviet Navy's most impassioned detractor: "Impeded by a defensive tradition with little imagination, an archaic navy, a primitive formation with little operation experience, the Soviet navy was not prepared to commit itself to the challenge of such an important campaign." "The Soviet Navy and the Spanish Civil War," *Proceedings of the Citadel Conference on War and Diplomacy* (Charleston, SC: The Citadel, 1976), 73. [Back.](#)

[Stalin and the Spanish Civil War](#)