



[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

Part V: Soviet Advisors and Military Personnel in the Spanish War

[12. The Command Structure and Advisory Apparatus](#)

[13. General Activities of the Soviet Advisors](#)

1

For Western historians of the Spanish Civil War, the uncertainties regarding the quantity of Soviet weaponry that reached the Republic have been long-standing sources of debate. By the end of the Cold War, however, the basic contours of Soviet military assistance to Spain and the chronology of that aid had been adequately chronicled. The same could not be said of the Soviet personnel on the ground in Spain, about whom a great many rumors circulated but little was known concretely. That Soviet weaponry was better accounted for than Soviet participants is certainly understandable. Compared to soldiers and advisors, arms present fewer obstacles for fruitful research. At the end of the war, many hundreds of tons of Soviet equipment lay destroyed or abandoned on Spanish soil. Other Soviet arms found their way to military research centers in Italy and Germany; most were hauled off by the Nationalist victors to be taken apart, inventoried, and discussed in the official histories of the war. If they were still functional, planes, tanks, and artillery pieces were incorporated into the Nationalist arsenal, some being used to considerable effect for several years after the war's end. Soviet personnel, on the other hand, with almost no exceptions, were not available for inspection by fascist or Nationalist officials. Moscow took meticulous care to evacuate its entire contingent before the end of the war and ensure that very few Soviet participants fell into Nationalist hands. ¹

The inherent limitations of historiography on this war have further clouded the issue of the advisors. To reconstruct the workings of the Soviet military apparatus in Spain, historians have long been forced to rely on Western eyewitness accounts whose reliability was often questionable. In addition, Soviet versions of the war routinely obscured the extent of direct Russian participation on the Loyalist side. Meanwhile, both during and after the war the Nationalists made every effort to paint the Republic red, and often exaggerated the influence and total numbers of Soviet personnel. Finally, let us add that the numbers of Soviet men in Spain were sometimes unintentionally inflated by Republican bystanders, who often mistook non-Russian Slavs fighting with the International Brigades for Soviets. This is perhaps forgivable since, for many Eastern European volunteers, the *lingua franca* was in fact Russian.

The far from satisfactory state of the literature has often led to serious misunderstandings and errors, such as the decades-long confusion surrounding the advisors Berzin and Gorev, whom the brigadista Robert Colodny mistakenly thought were the same man. They were, of course, different (if similar-looking) individuals, but the error was soon incorporated into Hugh Thomas' acclaimed history of the war, and thus passed for fact. ² Difficult Russian names and unlikely codenames made the matter no easier for non-Slavicist Hispanists; some real names were taken for codenames, and vice-versa. Some confusion has also resulted from the presence of a certain "Stern" (a.k.a. "Kléber"), commander of the 11th International Brigade, and a "Shtern" (a.k.a. "Grigorovich"), the chief Soviet military advisor beginning in May 1937. To clear up just one additional error among scores: the author of a major Spanish reference work on the war claimed that World War II hero and future marshal of the Soviet Union G. K. Zhukov was an advisor in Spain. ³ In fact, Marshal Zhukov never set foot in Spain; his namesake, G. V. Zhukov, was a naval advisor for the Republic.

[14. Soviet Pilots and Soviet Air Force Instructors](#)

[15. Soviet Tank Crews and Tank Instructors](#)[16. Success and Failure of Operation X](#)

In addition to the advisors, technicians, communications workers, and interpreters, the Soviet Union sent a number of direct combatants to participate in the Loyalist struggle. Unlike the advisors, about whom historians have written and speculated a great deal, comparatively little is known about the Soviet pilots and tankers who fought in Spain. Most of the primary and secondary accounts of the activities of this large group have not been translated from their original Russian, and most of the relevant publications issued by the Red Army and Military Archive on Soviet tank and aviation performance in the Spanish Civil War remained classified until 1991. The new accessibility of these sources now permits a fuller accounting of the role of the Soviet Union's active military participants in the war.

5

Soviet military documents indicate that the total numbers of Soviets engaged as combatants in the Spanish war included 772 pilots and 351 tank operators. In general, these specialists were brought to Spain for two reasons: first, to fill critical gaps in the Popular Army's capabilities; and second, to oversee the deployment of sophisticated Soviet weaponry, which few members of the Republican forces were trained to operate. Unlike the military advisors, who remained in Spain until the end of the war, Soviet pilots and tank crews were phased out in the second half of 1938 as trained Spaniards took their places.

Notes:

Note 1: They were not entirely successful. Two pilots, Khoziainov and Kirsanov, were evidently captured in 1937. Little is known about what the Nationalists might have learned from them, but the matter was the source of considerable consternation among Soviet officials. An intelligence report to Voroshilov from 22 Oct. 1937 alerted Moscow that the matter "deserves the most serious attention." RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1033, ll. 174-183. Reproduced in Mary Habeck and Ronald Radosh, *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 484. [Back.](#)

Note 2: Robert Colodny, *The Struggle for Madrid: The Central Epic of the Spanish Conflict, 1936-37* (New York: Paine-Whitman, 1958), 162-65. The error has been repeated in numerous publications. See, for example, Carlos Fernandez Cuenca, *La guerra de España y el Cine* (Madrid: Editorial Nacional, 1972), vol. I: 303. [Back.](#)

Note 3: M. Rubio Cabeza, *Diccionario de la Guerra Civil Española* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1987), vol. II: 796-97. Thanks to Iurii Ribalkin for bringing this to my attention. [Back.](#)

[Stalin and the Spanish Civil War](#)