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- 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

12. Command Structure and Advisory Apparatus in Spain

1

I. The Republic Requests Advisors

The arrival in Spain of major arms shipments from the USSR in October 1936 was not expected to resolve all the Republic's military problems. In terms of prosecuting the war effort, three critical deficiencies remained: 1) experienced military leadership; 2) an organized and functioning army, and; 3) technicians capable of operating the Soviet planes, tanks, and artillery now arriving weekly on Spanish shores. The exact reasons for these shortcomings lay in recent Spanish history, the nature of the Nationalist uprising, and military developments in the Loyalist zone.

In 1936, Spain had less recent military experience than any other large European nation. Neutral in World War I, the Spaniards had not fought a major armed struggle on their own soil since the Napoleonic wars. Very few Spaniards alive in the 1930s could recall the last phase of the Carlist civil wars that ended in the 1870s. Many more remembered the Cuban uprising and the war with the United States of the 1890s, but virtually none of the participants in that military struggle were still active in the army four decades later. The recent conflict in Morocco, which occupied various Spanish forces in the early 1920s, provided the only military experience that any Spaniard was likely to possess when the civil war broke out.

To the Republic's detriment, the overwhelming majority of the officer staff from the Morocco conflict, most notably General Franco, sided with the rebels. Indeed, as we shall see, the rebels won over a disproportionate share of junior and senior officers. The Republic's predicament was made worse when, in the first days of the war, anarchists and enlisted regulars massacred many of the officers caught in Loyalist territory. This was particularly common in the Republican navy, which found itself leaderless several weeks into the war, a situation from which it never recovered. ¹ Worse, a fundamental breakdown in military order characterized most Republican responses to the Nationalist uprising. A government decree just three days into the conflict authorized the arming of the populace. This measure prevented further immediate loss of territory, although most Republican leaders agreed that a regular army of some sort would eventually be required to defeat the rebels.

There was little doubt, even as early as August 1936, that, apart from massive quantities of weaponry, the Republic required a broad range of military advisors and instructors, as well as aviation, tank, artillery, naval, military industry, guerrilla warfare, and intelligence experts. Consequently, at the same time that the Republic issued its appeals to the Soviet Union for arms, Madrid also requested the dispatch of military personnel. Documentary evidence of such requests was first presented in the 1974 multi-volume official Soviet history of the civil war. In a reprinted letter from the Soviet leadership to Prime Minister Largo Caballero, the Russians attested that military advisors were sent to Spain in response to the Republic's "repeated requests." ² Anti-communist historians, intent on advancing a thesis of destructive Soviet intervention and willful malice in the Spanish arena, have tended to downplay the implication of this document and others that mirror its spirit. ³ The letter in question, almost certainly authentic and in any case preserved in the Defense Ministry archive, is but one of many primary sources that link the dispatch of Soviet personnel to Spain to entreaties from the Republican government. Documents in the RGVA indicate that these requests were usually included with arms orders. On 16 December

1936, for example, the Republic's Prime Minister Largo Caballero sent the following letter to Soviet Ambassador Rosenberg:

5

This letter confirms the request, submitted by aviation minister Prieto and communicated by wire and diplomatic pouch, for the dispatch of planes and aviation equipment. We request the immediate dispatch of the following:

1. 60 fighter aircraft type I-15 along with all equipment and all spare parts necessary for these machines. 20 spare M-25 motors and 30 auto starters, 5 million rounds, of which 2 million incendiary. We request as well the dispatch of 60 pilots, 60 technicians, 25 weapons specialists, 2 aviation engineers, 2 weapons engineers, 15 technicians with advanced expertise in staff services and 5 experienced drivers.
2. 40 high-speed bomber aircraft with all spare parts and equipment, 20 spare M-100 motors and 30 auto starters, 1500 100-kilo bombs, 500 50-kilo bombs and 1.5 million rounds. For the operation of these planes request the dispatch of 40 pilots, 40 gunners, 40 bombers, 40 aviation technicians, 20 mechanics, 15 radio technicians, 1 aviation engineer and 1 weapons engineer.
3. 30 DE-6 fighter aircraft with all spare parts and equipment, 10 spare motors and 15 auto starters, 2 million rounds, half of which incendiary, 10,000 10-kilo bombs, 2500 25-kilo bombs, 2,000 50-kilo incendiary bombs. For these aircraft—30 pilots, 30 gunners, 30 technicians, 30 weapons specialists, 1 weapons engineers, 1 aviation technician, 10 technicians with
4. 16 heavy bombers with M-34 motors and all spare parts, equipment and necessary mechanisms and a full staff of pilots and gunners for night flights, as well as weapons specialists. ⁴

In this request alone, the Republic's leadership asked for a contingent of over 550 Soviet pilots, technicians, and advisors. Thus, whatever may be said of the overall impact of the advisors, they did not ride in uninvited on the back of Soviet weaponry; they came to Spain because many in the Loyalist government believed they were needed to help organize the Republic's defenses.

II. The Appointment of Soviet Personnel

To accommodate these requests for professional assistance, the Soviet Defense Commissariat established a highly classified and exclusive selection process to provide the Republic with Soviet military specialists. With the exception of interpreters, nearly all candidates for the Spanish mission were selected from various Defense Commissariat service branches. ⁵ Russian military historian Iurii Ribalkin's conclusions on this subject, the result of extensive research in the Defense Commissariat Archive (TsAMO), cast considerable new light on the assignment of Soviet personnel to Spain, though as we shall see, the decreed intentions were not always realized as planned:

Candidates selected possessed high levels of professional preparation, battle expertise and moral and political qualities. Commanders were selected from the best specialists, with superior military and political training. Many of these were graduates of military academies, and had been extensively engaged in the services at the command level. Prior to dispatch to Spain, the chosen candidates received additional instruction at training sessions in Moscow, where they studied military-political conditions, tactical considerations specific to the concrete military situation in the Spanish theater, and received practical advice. ⁶

In contrast to the weapons shipments—again according to Ribalkin—few personnel posts were filled with Stalin's direct consent. Only those individuals advanced to the posts of chief military advisor or other senior advisory positions (i.e., front or division level) required Central Committee approval. ⁷ Even by Soviet standards, the secrecy that cloaked the appointment of personnel for Operation X is striking. Nikolai Kuznetsov, who served as Soviet naval attaché to the Republic, claims that neither the Black Sea fleet commander, E. Khazanov, nor the chief of the Soviet navy, V. Orlov, were informed of his assignment to Spain. ⁸

10

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

Yet the matter should not be so summarily dismissed. To be certain, many citizens of Russia and the neighboring Soviet Republics did in fact volunteer to serve in Spain. This point is frequently made in the Soviet memoir accounts of the war; the Red Army advisor Malinovsky, in addition to claiming that his appointment to Spain was the result of his own initiative, writes of an "endless avalanche" of similar requests submitted to the Defense Commissariat. ⁹ The aviation advisor M. Iakushin claimed that he was assigned to Spain only after "multiple requests and solicitations." ¹⁰ The same position is maintained by foreign observers of the popular Soviet reaction to the war, one of whom claims that "thousands of young people volunteered to go to fight in Spain." ¹¹

The Republic's ambassador in Moscow reported to Madrid as early as 22 October 1936—two weeks after taking his post—that his embassy was already receiving individual offers to fight on the side of the Republic. ¹² By the summer of 1937, the initial trickle had become a steady stream of Soviet citizens attempting to go to Spain. In Pascua's words,

[q]ualified engineers, mechanics and other persons very often present themselves at the embassy, soliciting information on how they might obtain Spanish citizenship or be permitted to depart for Spain in order to assist us in the war and permanently incorporate themselves into our country. ¹³

Documents in Russian military archives reveal that appeals for assignment to Spain were also directed to the highest Soviet authorities, and came from many quarters, including ordinary civilians, senior officers, young cadets, and recently graduated pilots, tankers, artillerymen, and sailors. One senior officer in the Leningrad naval hospital applied directly to Stalin, informing the Soviet leader that he was prepared to organize a medical detachment for service in Spain. "I can leave at a moment's notice," he wrote eagerly. ¹⁴ A civilian, meanwhile, was no less passionate: "I wish to be used in any fashion in Spain.... It is insulting to sit here in ignorance at a moment when all thoughts should be concentrated on duties in Spain...." ¹⁵ Quite a few requests, like the following letter to Voroshilov from Communist Youth (Komsomol) member S. V. Frolov, were reasoned and convincing:

15

Comrade Army Commissar! I herewith entreat you to send me to fight on the Spanish Republican front against Italo-German fascism for the independence of the heroic Spanish people. I am a Komsomol member since 1931, a Party candidate since 1937 and in the army since April 1936. The Party and Komsomol have cultivated in me political leadership and given me the opportunity to master aviation mechanics. I want to justify their confidence. Fighting on the Spanish front against fascism will allow me to pay back this debt with honor. [15](#)

None of this should be surprising. The Politburo's energetic mobilization of the campaign of solidarity with the Republic, begun just two weeks into the war, had raised the Loyalist cause to a unique position in the Soviet imagination. Nonetheless, there is no evidence that any Russian who volunteered to serve in Spain was ever sent, though this may well have happened in a few isolated cases. However, the very nature of Stalin's dictatorship, the secrecy of Operation X, and Moscow's firm denials of Soviet military involvement during the Spanish war makes the very notion of free and open enlistment unlikely if not impossible. [17](#)

It does not necessarily follow, however, that those who received the nod went unwillingly. Though recruited by military officials, it is plausible, even logical, that candidates were always given a way out of the assignment; that is, they were asked to volunteer. Numerous Russian eyewitness accounts insist that none of the Soviets who served in Spain did so through coercion of any kind. [18](#) This is likely true, yet its significance should not be exaggerated. For the Soviet regime, nothing could be served by impressing uncooperative citizens into service in the Spanish war—a struggle waged for a republican government far from the homeland, in which each Russian would work with little supervision in the company of citizens of advanced democracies. On the contrary, the candidates selected for Spanish service were pointedly the least likely citizens to abuse the privilege of this rare contact with the West.

Let us recall that the civil war's duration corresponded nearly exactly with the worst years of the Stalinist terror. By 1936, the Soviet regime had developed highly effective methods of controlling the population. Indeed, a previously uninhabited region of Russia was opened up at this time as a final destination for Stalin's victims. Spain represented the opposite possibility. Assignment here was a reward: hard-won, cherished, and not to be refused. Soviet memoirs published in the last thirty years confirm that an assignment to Spain was always a source of pride. More than a few Soviet personnel who served in Spain were of the same mind on the purpose and value of the assignment. One tank lieutenant summarized his sentiments prior to departure this way:

I am proud that of the many thousands of Soviet citizens who wish to fight on the side of Republican Spain, I have the high honor to become one of the soldiers ... in that romantic place, fighting this noble war of liberation.... [19](#)

20

Once having arrived, however, some advisors were more ambivalent, as we will presently observe.

As with the dispatch of weapons shipments out of Soviet ports, Section X oversaw all aspects of the transfer of Soviet personnel to Spain. Unlike the weapons shipments, which were nearly always sent by sea, Soviets bound for Spain were sometimes routed by rail through Europe, though many others accompanied the arms deliveries by sea. [20](#) A few Russians took more circuitous routes via the Balkans or in some cases even Africa. [21](#) Prior to departure, Section X gave each person leaving Soviet soil individual instructions and itineraries, travel documents, and money. Air force and tank crews were given temporary passports, while senior commanders and advisors were usually provided with two passports: their own, and a fake, generally from a neutral European state such as Switzerland or a

Scandinavian country. Other military advisors went to Spain under diplomatic cover, and carried documents attesting to their appointment to the Soviet embassy, the commercial delegation, or the general consul in Barcelona. ²²

Section X gave one final item to all Soviet advisors and instructors prior to their departure for Spain: a pseudonym. These were invented with the hope of disguising the nationality of Soviet personnel in Spain. Whether or not this gambit was effective, the pseudonyms succeeded in confusing a great number of later researchers who have struggled to understand the Soviets' command structure on the Iberian Peninsula. Recently opened archival files now offer the opportunity to examine authoritative listings of Soviet personnel and their Spanish codenames. ²³ It may be observed that, in a rare instance of comic relief, Section X abandoned their usual gravity and assigned clever and amusing pseudonyms for many of their men in Spain, alternating between famous place names (Lepanto, Peru, Capri), Italian opera composers (Donizetti, Rossini), French and Spanish feminine names (Raquel, Mercedes), famous French names (Honoré, Voltaire), and common Spanish and English names (Rinaldo, Juan, Reed, Ira, and Margaret). After the war, the pseudonyms assigned for use in Spain occasionally followed Soviet personnel back home. Pavel Batov, for example, was still called "Fritz," even as a general in 1943. ²⁴

III. The Advisors in Republican Spain

The first Soviets to arrive in Spain after the war began, not counting Comintern agents, were journalists, filmmakers, members of the newly established Soviet diplomatic mission, and a handful of military and economic specialists. The first advisors on the scene included the military attaché V. E. Gorev, the naval attaché Nikolai Kuznetsov, ²⁵ the chief military advisor Jan Berzin, the economic (or trade) attaché Artur Stachevskii, and Aleksandr Rodimtsev, who served largely as advisor to Enrique Lister, commander of the Quinto Regimiento. ²⁶ This skeletal team arrived ahead of the main influx of Soviet advisors and technicians, and was charged with overseeing Operation X on the Spanish end.

Large numbers of Soviet personnel sent by Section X first began arriving with the initial arms shipments in early October. The *Komsomol*, which arrived at Cartagena on 12 October with tanks and armored vehicles, also carried a tank battalion of fifty-one men under the command of *Kombrig* Semen M. Krivoshein. ²⁷ The following day, on 13 October, the first Soviet pilots entered Spain via France. ²⁸ On 16 October, Voroshilov sent a coded telegram to Gorev, announcing that more military advisors were en route and that they had orders to take up advisory posts in the People's Army. ²⁹ By 26 October, this additional group of seventeen advisors and thirty-three instructors had arrived. ³⁰ To this team were soon added communications teams, assembly and repair crews, engineers, and translators. Over the course of October and the first weeks of November, a steady stream of Soviet personnel made their way to the Republican zone.

Documents in RGVA indicate that the escalation of Soviet involvement in Spain on the personnel level was quite rapid in the first two months of Operation X [See Tables V-1 and V-2]. According to one declassified document, by 31 October 1936, Section X had 1226 individuals either in Spain, en route, or awaiting departure in the USSR. This number must be used with some caution, since at the time only 268 Soviets were actually in Spain. A week later, on 5 November, the number was just 396. Despite the speed and efficiency with which Section X set forth the logistics of the operation, its implementation could apparently not be rushed. Some trained personnel destined for Spain may have never been sent. Furthermore, the duration of individual assignments was quite short; very few Soviets remained in Spain for more than six months, and for some the mission was even shorter. ³¹ In sum, the selection and training of personnel, the clandestine dispatch via land or sea,

the 3500-kilometer journey to Spain, and the frequent turnover meant that at any moment more Soviets might be en route to or from Spain, or earmarked for eventual departure, than on the ground in the Republic.

25

Numerous Western historians have claimed that by the beginning of 1939 Moscow had pulled most, if not all, of its personnel out of Spain. ³² To be sure, some decrease is understandable. Once Spaniards were trained to use Soviet weaponry, particularly tanks and aircraft, the need for Soviets to participate directly in battle decreased. In his study of the Popular Army, Michael Alpert suggests that after the Loyalist forces had demonstrated some mastery in military arts—notably at Brunete and Belchite, to say nothing of Guadalajara—the Soviet advisors were gradually recalled. ³³ By fall of 1937, for example, the T-26 tank crews in the field were primarily Spanish; by the summer of 1938, the same was true for the remaining BT-5 fast tanks. ³⁴ Similarly, Spanish pilots trained in the Soviet Union gradually eliminated the need for Soviet airmen. In January 1938, the head of the Republican air force, Hidalgo de Cisneros, reported to Voroshilov that few additional Soviet pilots would be needed. ³⁵ But many Western scholars have incorrectly claimed that all or nearly all Soviets were removed from Spain sometime in 1938. A recent study purporting to incorporate new Soviet documentation asserts that, by 1939, "only a few Soviets remained in Spain, and they left quickly." ³⁶ Bolloten, tireless advocate of the abandonment thesis, incorporates without reservation the poorly documented findings of José Fernández Sánchez, who claims that the last major group of Soviet advisors left Spain on the morning of 25 January 1939. ³⁷

Newly available archival materials now demonstrate that, while the total number of Russians in the Republic dropped off considerably from the high point of Soviet involvement in mid-1937, claims of an early exit by the Soviet contingent have been exaggerated. On 23 October 1938 the number of Soviet personnel in Spain was 250; ³⁸ ten weeks later, on 4 January 1939, the number had only dropped to 218. ³⁹ Indeed, a group of Soviet advisors arrived in Spain two weeks after the date cited above by Bolloten and Fernández Sánchez. This took place on 7 February 1939, when twenty-five Soviets arrived in the rapidly shrinking Republican zone, among them seven general military advisors and instructors, twelve artillerymen, two sailors, and four others. ⁴⁰ The last major withdrawal of Soviet personnel did not take place until 27 February, when a group of forty-six Soviets left Spain, including the third and final chief Soviet advisor, K. M. Kachanov. ⁴¹ According to several unverifiable sources, it was not until 12 March, less than three weeks before the fall of the Republic, that the last Russian, M. C. Shumilov (a.k.a. General Shilov), abandoned Spain. ⁴²

Since the war's end, few statistics have vexed historians more than the total number of Soviet personnel engaged in the Spanish Civil War. During the war itself, high levels of misinformation propagated by both sides led to absurd declarations of Soviet manpower in Spain, which ranged from none to 35,000 to 80,000. ⁴³ After the war, Francoist historians or Nationalist sympathizers often exaggerated total figures: de la Cierva claimed 7,000-8,000; Alcófar Nassaes, 10,000; and Salas Larrazábal, 20,000. A Republican sympathizer, Salvador de Madariaga, put the number at 6,000. ⁴⁴ Objective studies from the 1950s often cite numbers nearly as high as the Francoist works: David E. Allen, ambiguously, claimed "under 6,000," while Cattell estimated 4,000-5,000. ⁴⁵ Later Western accounts reduced these amounts considerably, Delperrie to 3,000-4,000 and Thomas to 3,000. The lowest estimates came from Soviet versions of the war published from the 1960s to 1980s, including Pritsker, Líster, Meshcheriakov, *Solidarity*, *Guerra y Revolución*, *My internatsionalisty* and *Leningradtsy v Ispanii*, all of which cite figures between 2,000-3,000. ⁴⁶ The sole exception is the 1974 *Istoriia ftoroi mirovoi voiny*, which claimed that only 557

Soviets participated in the Spanish war, ⁴⁷ a figure which was picked up and repeated as fact by at least one Western historian. ⁴⁸

Even with open access to many Russian archives it is still not possible to determine the exact number of Soviets who served in Spain. Recent Russian historians have come away from the archives with quite distinct tallies. Tolmachaev has concurred with the figures listed in the Academy of Sciences of the USSR's oft-translated *Solidarnost' narodov s Ispanskoj respublikoi, 1936-1939*. ⁴⁹ He asserts that over the course of the civil war the Soviets sent 2,082 men and women to Spain. ⁵⁰ His figures include all Soviet personnel in Spain save members of the diplomatic corps, the press, and secret police. Novikov and Ribalkin declare that over 4,000 Soviets served the Republican cause, but this estimate includes not only diplomatic and military personnel but also Russian instructors who trained Spaniards on Soviet soil. ⁵¹

It is my view that the number of military personnel sent from the USSR to Spain was on the order of 2,100-2,150, among which number approximately 600 were non-combatant military advisors. This estimate takes into account the verifiable numbers pertaining to individual assignments, such as pilots and tankers (listed in Table V-3), as well as an undetermined but probably not large (i.e., 20-40 at most) number of NKVD—numbers impossible to determine until the archive of the former KGB is finally made accessible. In addition, one must count separately civilians and members of the diplomatic corps sent to Spain, who together could not have totaled more than 20-25. ⁵² According to the documents in the RGVA, the total number of Soviet dead in the war was 125, while 43 were declared missing in action [See Table V-3]. Furthermore, Ribalkin estimates that, given the turnover rate and the long duration of the journey to Spain, it is unlikely that the number of Soviets in Spain at any time ever surpassed 600-800. ⁵³

30

The amounts listed in Table V-3 are not entirely new. With very minor differences they appeared in the official Soviet history of the war, and they have occasionally been quoted by Western historians. ⁵⁴ Only the recent accessibility of archival evidence now makes possible the verification and revision of the data in this publication. The numbers, of course, tell only part of the story. Despite a tendency among Western historians to treat Soviet personnel in Spain as a monolithic group, the command apparatus was highly structured, with all tasks delegated to individual posts. An analysis of the role and performance of each part of this apparatus will be the subject of the balance of this chapter.

Table V-1

Soviet Personnel Deployed for Operation X before 31 October 1936, according to lists in RGVA ⁵⁵

	Ready for Transport	En Route	In Action	Total
Tankers/ armored vehicle operators	3 110-man T-26 battalions	—	Krivoshein Group: 51	381
Pilots (in groups)	Gusev group/ SSS:110 I-16: 69 R-Zet: 110 SSS: 110	I-15: 33 I-16: 80	SB: 63 I-16: 35	610
Pilots sent individually	—	—	25	25

Assembly/ repair teams	I-16: 10 R-Zet: 7	—	SB: 31 I-15: 11	59
Advisors	—	6	21	27
Instructors	Naval commanders: 12	5	6	23
Military attaché and support staff	—	5	—	5
Wireless operators and coders	42	6	9	57
Interpreters	25	3	11	39
Total	825	133	268	1226

Table V-2

Soviet Personnel Deployed for Operation X before 5 November 1936, according to lists in RGVA ⁵⁶

	Ready for Transport	En Route	In Action	Total
Tankers/ armored vehicle operators	1 T-26 battalion: 100 Tankers for earlier shipped tanks: 57 For armored vehicles: 39	—	Krivoshein Group: 49	245
Pilots (in groups)	SSS: 82 R-Zet: 82	—	SB: 63 I-15: 58 I-16: 69	354
Pilots sent individually	—	—	25	25
Assembly/ repair teams	IFor R-Zet: 5	—	63	68
Advisors	—	—	27	27
Instructors	Naval command: 10 Others: 5	2	6	23
Military attaché and support staff	—	—	5	5

Wireless operators and coders	32	—	17	49
Interpreters	23	3	14	39
Total	434	5	396	835

Table V-3

Condition of Soviet Personnel Deployed in Operation X before 13 May 1939, according to lists in RGVA ⁵⁷

	Total	Fatalities	Missing in Action
Pilots	770	77	22
Tankers	351	34	19
General Military Advisors/Instructors	222	5	1
Interpreters	204	2	1
Engineers/Technical Specialists	131	1	—
Wireless/Radio Intelligence Specialists/Coders/Signalers	101	—	—
Sailors	77	—	—
Artillery Advisors and Instructors	64	2	—
Coders	56	—	—
Anti-aircraft specialists	36	—	—
Other Advisors and Instructors	27	3	—
Field Engineers	10	—	—
Medical specialists	10	—	—
Signalers	10	—	—
Political workers	9	1	—
Fuel/Chemical Specialists	4	—	—
Total	2082	125	43

Precise details of the command structure of the Soviet advisors in the Spanish war have long eluded historians. Using archival documentation, secondary sources, and the recent work of Russian historians, it is now possible to reconstruct the Soviet advisory apparatus and assess its work in Spain. In September 1936, as part of the Republican government's organization of the Popular Army, a new institution, the Chief Military Advisory (CMA), was created with the specific aim of accommodating Soviet advisors. ⁵⁸ The CMA was under the leadership of a senior Soviet military advisor, a post successively filled during the course of the war by Jan K. Berzin (1936-37), Grigorii Shtern (1937-38), and K. M. Kachanov (1938-39).

35

Subordinate to the head advisor were senior military advisors in the various service branches of the military: general staff, infantry, aviation, motor-mechanized forces, artillery, political work, naval forces, communications, sanitation, and rearguard services. Each senior advisor had a separate apparatus below him—for instance, the advisor for aviation also commanded advisors specializing in communications, weapons, and

maintenance, as well as the pilots directly participating in the war. Most senior advisors had subordinate assistants who performed similar duties. For example, Lieutenant Chernov worked directly below the Basque front advisor Ianson; Major Bershin was the assistant to the Asturian front advisor Malyshev. ⁵⁹ Kulik, the advisor to the Central front, had seven assistants. ⁶⁰

In contrast to weaponry, the effectiveness of which could be concretely established and whose acquisition could more easily remain within the framework of a commercial agreement, the arrival of Soviet personnel presented greater complications for the Republic. The paradox was as follows. On the one hand, Soviet military advisors, technicians, specialists, and support staff were desperately needed by the struggling People's Army. Yet both the Republican and Soviet leadership were fully aware that the presence in Loyalist territory of a large contingent of Soviet military men could erode the impression of a politically independent Republic, and thus isolate the Loyalist government even more than it already was. How could the engagement of Soviet advisors best support, and not undermine, the war effort? Communications between the Kremlin and Loyalist representatives touched frequently on the issue, and it was one of the main topics that Pascua treated in his multiple meetings with the Soviet leadership. Moreover, the oft-quoted 21 December 1936 letter from Stalin, Molotov, and Voroshilov to the Loyalist prime minister made clear that the advisors sent to Spain were bound by stated limitations on their work, and that prior to leaving for Spain, they

... received orders to provide military advice to the Spanish military leadership, and they must report to us on this assistance. They were categorically instructed to keep in mind that ... Soviet advisors, as foreigners in Spain, can only be of real benefit ... if they remain strictly within the limits of advisors and only advisors. We believe that precisely in this manner should you exploit our comrades. We amicably request that you report to us on the extent to which our military advisors successfully carry out these tasks for you.... Only with a positive assessment of their work on your behalf will it be advisable to allow them to continue to work in Spain. ⁶¹

Once in the field, however, the advisors sometimes received new orders that, when not directly contradictory, tended at least to complicate if not supercede the earlier warning to avoid direct intervention. The basic problem confronted by the advisors was summed up in mid-1937 by chief military advisor Shtern:

The work of the advisors ... is a very delicate matter. Before my departure comrade Voroshilov gave me a short directive on the work of our people: Do not in any case issue an order, but ... do everything necessary for victory. ⁶²

40

The advisor's role was thus one of inherent contradictions. While Voroshilov demanded victory, other dispatches to the Kremlin's men in Spain indicate that Moscow increasingly tied their hands. An example of this dual-track policy is demonstrated in Narkomindel directive No. 3780, issued by Litvinov on 9 December 1936 and sent to Marcel Rosenberg, the Soviet ambassador to the Republic:

[C]omrade Rosenberg, together with comrade Grishin, are obliged to explain to our military workers that in no case should they alter the Spanish command. They should conduct their work in such a way that the Spanish general staff and the officer corps will not feel that questions are being decided through their [the Soviet advisors'] command. The process of military-operational and organizational advising is as follows: as a general rule, apply first to the officer [i.e., Republican] who is directly answerable to the corresponding problem (and not to any higher-

ranking officer) and then provide ... advice cautiously.

... Comrades Rosenberg and Grishin are advised to tirelessly fulfill the implementation of this order. In the event that one or another comrade nevertheless is not able to renounce methods of commanding, advise him that the problem will be resolved in the comrade's removal from the work in Spain. [63](#)

In this light, the famous line attributed to Stalin regarding his men assigned to the Spanish war—"Podal'she ot artillereiskogo ognia!" ("Stay out of artillery fire!")—seems to be an odd sort of red herring, for it has little to do with the most serious sticking point of the advisors' tenure. [64](#) Whether or not the Soviets fell victim to shelling was far less important than the extent of their powers, and the perception of those powers, within the Popular Army. As the war progressed, and as the Kremlin came to understand the potential harm that overt Soviet control of the army could cause the Loyalist effort, Moscow took increasing precautions to ensure that its involvement on the side of the Republic would not be interpreted as intervention in Spanish domestic affairs. But the Kremlin was also palpably concerned that the Soviets were directing a losing effort, and consequently often demanded extreme and ultimately counterproductive measures in a futile attempt to win the advantage.

One might have hoped that, with the declassifications of the Soviet archives beginning in 1991, a clearer window would be opened onto the degree of control the advisors wielded in the People's Army. In fact, the availability of many thousands of pages of reports, filed by dozens of Soviet military intelligence (GRU) agents, in some ways has only complicated the issue. What we largely find are field reports of agents who must explain to Moscow their stewardship of a mostly failed intervention. When operations succeed or appear to be on the verge of success, the advisors often seek to claim credit, and claim that their intervention was indispensable to the outcome. If a plan goes badly, the same agent informs his superiors that the Loyalist command rejected a better Soviet suggestion and proceeded recklessly on its own. Thus, these declassified after-action reports must be treated as cautiously as any other source and weighed against the reports submitted by the Republic's own command. These reservations will be borne in mind as we now endeavor to assess the complex role of the advisors in various areas.

Notes:

Note 1: See Hugh G. Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 3rd ed. rev. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 331-32; Michael Alpert, *La guerra civil española en el mar* (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1987), 37-53. [Back.](#)

Note 2: Dolores Ibárruri, et al., *Guerra y revolución en España 1936-1939* (Moscow: Progreso, 1967), vol I: 419-20. The original is at TsAMO, f. 132, op. 2642, del. 77, ll. 45-46. [Back.](#)

Note 3: Bolloten does cite Largo Caballero's letter and the specific comment "repeated requests." He claims, however, that the true "executors of Soviet policy in Spain" were the Comintern and NKVD, whom the prime minister did not invite. See Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution in Spain, 1936-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 502-03. The veracity of this claim will be considered below. [Back.](#)

Note 4: Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Voennyi Arkhiv (RGVA), f. 33987, op. 3, del. 960, ll. 193-195. [Back.](#)

Note 5: See RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 893, ll. 207-208. [Back.](#)

Note 6: Iurii E. Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch' Sovetskogo Soiuza ispanskomu narodu v natsional'no-revoliutsionnoi voine 1936-1939," Ph.D. diss. (Institute of Military History, Moscow, 1992), 99. [Back.](#)

Note 7: Tsentralnyi Arkhiv Ministerstva Oborony (TsAMO), f. 132, op. 2642, del. 82, ll. 192-196. Cited in Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch'," 99, and M. V. Novikov, *SSSR, Komintern i grazhdanskaia voina v Ispanii 1936-1939* (Iaroslav: Iaroslavskii gos. pedagogicheskii universitet, 1995), vol. II: 56. [Back.](#)

Note 8: N. G. Kuznetsov, *Na dalekom meridiane* (Moscow: Nauka, 1988), 9-10. [Back.](#)

Note 9: R. Malinovsky, "Torbellinos de ira en España," in *Bajo la bandera de la España republicana* (Moscow: Progreso, 1967), 8. [Back.](#)

Note 10: M. Yakushin, "En la primera batalla contra el fascismo," in *Bajo la bandera*, 343. [Back.](#)

Note 11: Mary M. Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 130. [Back.](#)

Note 12: Pascua to Madrid, 22 Oct. 1936. Archivo Histórico Nacional - Madrid (AHN). Diversos. M. Pascua, leg. 2, exp. 9-4. [Back.](#)

Note 13: AHN-Madrid. Diversos. M. Pascua, leg. 2, exp. 13-14. The letter, addressed to Julian Zugazagoitia, is dated 31 Jul. 1937. [Back.](#)

Note 14: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1149, ll. 12-13. [Back.](#)

Note 15: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1010, l. 19. [Back.](#)

Note 16: RGVA, f. 34, del. 2, l. 247. [Back.](#)

Note 17: It should be underlined that, although the Red Army took no volunteers for its operation in Spain, many Soviet citizens did volunteer. The point should not be belabored, although the secondary literature continues to scoff at the notion of genuine manifestations of Soviet sympathy with the Republican cause. In a recent survey of the International Brigade, for example, Ricardo de la Cierva declares condescendingly, "Can anyone imagine the existence of a single volunteer, in the Western sense of the word, in Joseph Stalin's USSR?" See Ricardo de la Cierva, *Brigadas Internacionales, 1936-1939: La verdadera historia* (Madrid: Fénix, 1997), 167. [Back.](#)

Note 18: See Adelina and Paulina Abramson, *Mosaico Roto* (Madrid: Compañía Literaria, 1995), 8-30. [Back.](#)

Note 19: A. A. Vetrov. "Dobrovol'tsy svobody," *Voprosy istorii* 4 (1972): 111. [Back.](#)

Note 20: M. V. Novikov, *SSSR, Komintern i grazhdanskaia*, vol. II, 56. [Back.](#)

Note 21: Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch'," 100. [Back.](#)

Note 22: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1010, l. 15. [Back.](#)

Note 23: A comprehensive list of all codenames given to Soviet personnel is available in RGVA. F. 33987. Op. 3, del. 1015, ll. 138-141. [Back.](#)

Note 24: Ilya Ehrenburg, *Menschen, Jahre, Leben* (East Berlin: Verlag Volk und Welt, 1978), vol. II: 372. [Back.](#)

Note 25: The initial Politburo advisory appointments are documented in the Protocols of the CCUSSR in RGASPI: the meeting of Aug. 21, 1936; f. 17, op. 3, del. 980, l. 308 and del. 981, l. 213. The Protocols do not, however, mention Gorev's appointment. Nikolai Kuznetsov confirms that Gorev arrived in Madrid with Rosenberg. See *Na dalekom meridiane* (Moscow: Nauka, 1988), 14. On Rodimtsev's arrival, see his own *Pod nebom Ispanii* (Moscow: Sov. Rossiia, 1968), 13-19. [Back.](#)

Note 26: Meanwhile, Aleksandr Orlov, the Soviet intelligence advisor to Spain, claims to have been appointed by the Politburo on 26 August, though he did not leave the USSR until 9 September. See Orlov, "Answers to the Questionnaire of Prof. S. G. Payne" (unpublished, 1968). [Back.](#)

Note 27: Kuznetsov, *Na dalekom meridiane*, 125. On the Soviet rank system at the time of the Spanish Civil War, Steven J. Zaloga offers the following helpful commentary: "During this period, the Red Army did not use traditional ranks but designations which referred to the role. So *Kombrig* (*Komandir brigada*, or Brigade Commander) was roughly the equivalent of a colonel, *Kompolk* (Regimental Commander) a lieutenant colonel, *Kombat* (Battalion Commander) a major; *Komrot* (Company Commander) a captain; *Komvzvod* (Platoon Commander) a lieutenant. In Spain, Soviet officers sometimes used standard Western ranks to avoid confusion." See Zaloga, "Soviet Tank Operations in the Spanish Civil War," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 12:3 (Sept. 1999): n. 2. [Back.](#)

Note 28: Report to Gorev from the Soviet aviation attaché B.F. Sveshnikov. RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 852, ll. 170-171. [Back.](#)

Note 29: TsAMO, f. 132, op. 2642, del. 192. Cited in Novikov, *SSSR, Komintern i grazhdanskaia*, vol. II, 55-6; and Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch'," 97-8. [Back.](#)

Note 30: RGVA. F. 33987, op. 3, del. 832, ll. 153-154. [Back.](#)

Note 31: Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch'," 100. [Back.](#)

Note 32: Among the few who do not is Stanley Payne, who asserts that, while the weapons shipment amounts dropped off, Soviet army advisors remained in Spain up to the end of the war. See *The Spanish Revolution* (New York: Norton, 1970), 354. [Back.](#)

Note 33: See Michael Alpert, *El ejército republicana en la guerra civil*, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno, 1989), 238. [Back.](#)

Note 34: Academy of Sciences of the USSR, *Solidarnost narodov s Ispanskoi respublikoi, 1936-1939* (Moscow: Progress, 1973), 252. [Back.](#)

Note 35: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1142, l. 4. [Back.](#)

Note 36: John McCannon, "Soviet Intervention in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939: A Reexamination," *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 22:2 (Summer 1995): 175. [Back.](#)

Note 37: Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 986; José Fernández Sánchez, "Los últimos consejeros rusos en España," *Historia* 16 (April 1984): 25-7. As a point of fact, Fernández Sánchez has printed 25 January, but Bolloten mistakenly cites the day as 26 January. The Fernández Sánchez piece, incidentally, is typical of many articles that *Historia* 16 printed in the 1980s on Soviet involvement in Spain. Just three pages long, it is almost a pictorial: the first page is nearly entirely filled by a photograph of a Soviet vessel arriving in Barcelona in October 1936—an odd choice for an article purporting to document the departure of the Soviet contingent in 1939—while the second and third pages show large and menacing mug shots of several Soviet advisors. The author's conclusions are supported by just seven footnotes, in which just four secondary Soviet works are cited. [Back.](#)

Note 38: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1167, l. 94. [Back.](#)

Note 39: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1143, l. 15. [Back.](#)

Note 40: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1260, ll. 6-14. [Back.](#)

Note 41: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3., ll. 17-19. [Back.](#)

Note 42: See Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 1067-68; and Fernández Sánchez, "Los últimos consejeros rusos," 27. The details of Shumilov's departure could not be confirmed in RGVA, and neither Ribalkin nor Novikov take up the issue at all. [Back.](#)

Note 43: The first figure originates from a national radio broadcast in Seville in December 1936; the second from the Soviet response and denial to the same. See Izvestiia, 10 Dec. 1936, 1. The figure of 80,000, also heard on a radio broadcast from Seville, is cited in Ehrenburg, *Menschen, Jahre, Leben*, vol. II, 407. [Back.](#)

Note 44: Ricardo de la Cierva's figure is cited in Raymond Carr, *Republic and Civil War in Spain* (London: Macmillan, 1971), 55; Salvador de Madariaga, *Spain: A Modern History* (New York: Praeger, 1958), 507; Alcófar Nassaes, *Los asesores soviéticos en la guerra civil* (Madrid: Dopesa, 1971), 140; R. Salas Larrazabal, *Historia del ejercito popular en la guerra civil* (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1973), vol. II: 2153. [Back.](#)

Note 45: David E. Allen, "The Soviet Union and the Spanish Civil War," Ph.D. diss. (Stanford, 1952), 381; David Cattell, *Communism and the Spanish Civil War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 198. [Back.](#)

Note 46: E. Líster, *Memorias de un luchador: Los primeros combates* (Madrid: Toro, 1977), 376-77; Ibárruri, et al., *Guerra y Revolución*, vol. II, 234. [Back.](#)

Note 47: *Istoriia ftoroi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: Voennei izdat. Ministerstva Oborony SSSR, 1974), 52. The figure is an error. In fact, according to documents in RGVA and the Archivo del Comité Central del Partido Comunista Española (CC PCE), the author or authors of this section of the Soviet work are referring to Soviet personnel present in Spain in the late summer of 1937. In a report to the Defense Commissariat from early September 1937, Shtern writes: "According to the calculation of the senior military advisor, on the day of my departure a total of 557 of our people were present...." See RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 961, ll. 173-175; CC PCE. Tesis y manuscritos. 19/10, no. 17, 178. [Back.](#)

Note 48: Fernando Schwartz, *La internacionalización de la guerra civil española: julio de 1936-marzo de 1937* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1971), 161. [Back.](#)

Note 49: Academy of Sciences of the USSR, *Solidarnost' narodov s Ispanskoi respublikoi, 1936-1939* (Moscow: Progreso, 1972), 254-56. [Back.](#)

Note 50: V. A Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniia: Opyt i uroki internatsional'noi pomoshchi (1936-1939)," Ph.D. diss. (Leningrad, 1991), 115. [Back.](#)

Note 51: Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch'," 141; Novikov, *SSSR, Komintern i grazhdanskaia*, vol. II, 68. [Back.](#)

Note 52: In Chapter Two above it was established that the Soviets' diplomatic mission to the Republic was small indeed. [Back.](#)

Note 53: Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch'," 141-42. By comparison, Claude Bowers, the American ambassador to Spain, estimated that no more than 500 Soviets ever served in Spain at the same time. See *My mission to Spain: Watching the Rehearsal for World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 193. [Back.](#)

Note 54: See Juan García Durán, "La intervención soviética en la guerra civil," *Historia* 16 103 (Nov. 1984): 20; and John McCannon, "Soviet Intervention," 162. [Back.](#)

Note 55: Compiled from RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 832, l. 245. This material is cited in Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniia," 217-18. [Back.](#)

Note 56: Compiled from RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 832, l. 316. This material is cited in Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniia," 219-20. [Back.](#)

Note 57: Compiled from RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1143, l. 127; del. 1149, l. 305. This material is cited in Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniia," 221. [Back.](#)

Note 58: Institut Voennoi Istorii (IVI). Dokumenty i materialy. Inv. 6408, l. 9. Cited in Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch'," 101. [Back.](#)

Note 59: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 893, l. 105. [Back.](#)

Note 60: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 893, ll. 89-90. [Back.](#)

Note 61: Ibárruri, et al., *Guerra y revolución*, vol. I, 419-20. According to Ribalkin, the original can be consulted in TsAMO, f. 132, op. 2642, del. 77, ll. 45-46. [Back.](#)

Note 62: RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 961, l. 171. [Back.](#)

Note 63: TsAMO, f. 132, op. 2642, del. 77, l. 44. Cited in Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch'," 106. Novikov paraphrases this passage; see *SSSR, Komintern i grazhdanskaia*, vol. II, 57-58. [Back.](#)

Note 64: Walter Krivitsky, In *Stalin's Secret Service* (New York: Harper, 1939), 77; "Stalin's Hand in Spain," *Saturday Evening Post*, 15 Apr. 1939, 120. [Back.](#)

[Stalin and the Spanish Civil War](#)