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## 13. General Activities of the Soviet Advisors

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### I. Organization of the Popular Army

According to some sources, the most far-reaching contribution of the Soviet advisors to the Republic lay in the institutionalization of a regular army. As early as 23 July 1936, the Comintern had indicated that the Republic's military forces would require reorganization in the event the conflict was not resolved quickly.<sup>1</sup> It seems likely that the initial blueprint for the creation of the Popular Army was in part the work of three of the advisors: Gorev, K. A. Meretskov, and B. M. Simonov. Together with Spanish commanders, the Soviets conceived a plan to convert the Republic's irregular militia forces and disorganized officer corps into a rigidly hierarchical institution modeled on the Red Army. The recommendations were submitted to the Republic's leadership in late October 1936 in a document labeled "Plan of First Priority Measures for the Organization of the Popular Army." The Soviet military plan for the Republic called for a top-down reorganization of the existing army, which included the creation of reserves, preparation of an officer corps, wide-scale political indoctrination among the troops, initiation of guerrilla activity behind enemy lines, organization of espionage and counter-espionage, establishment of a domestic military industry, and the strengthening of the capital's defenses.<sup>2</sup>

The plan was strikingly comprehensive, and the Republican government consequently had some difficulty in implementing all of its elements. Local munitions factories, discussed below in more detail, were very slow to come on line. Guerrilla activity was sporadic and never fully developed. Political indoctrination through commissar assignments, first announced in October 1936, initially encountered resistance among prominent Loyalists but was pushed through with mixed results. Otherwise, few of the Soviets' recommendations went entirely unheeded. The new army itself had been created earlier, on 14 October 1936, when Prime Minister Largo Caballero issued a decree to establish the first six brigades of the Popular Army. According to one Russian researcher, later decrees adhered closely to many of the original Soviet recommendations, including the creation of a general staff, military schools, training courses, and rearguard services.<sup>3</sup>

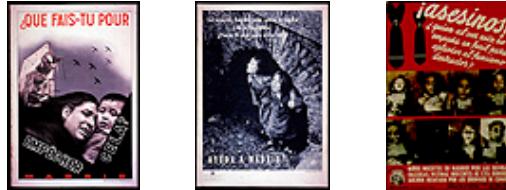
To be sure, in many of the reports submitted by the military attaché Gorev to the Defense Commissariat, the advisor claimed credit for most of the basic changes instituted in October. This in itself is not wholly convincing evidence that the advisors wielded extensive control over the course of the war, and so soon after arriving. On 16 October, for example, Gorev had reported that consultations with Loyalist officers "are not general in nature but are already taking place with paper and pencil." He added that "[t]he period of winning authority has turned into a period when it is possible to exploit the results."<sup>4</sup> These are by any measure vague statements that should be treated with skepticism. Was Gorev claiming that the Soviets had succeeded in assuming operational control over their Spanish counterparts? Or had the Russians simply taken up the roles of military advisors for which they were originally invited and engaged?

The issue is very difficult to resolve with certainty. It is clear, however, that a tension runs through the entire record of declassified correspondence between the advisors and Moscow: on the one hand, the advisors announce their achievements in directing Republican war efforts, while on the other hand they bitterly complain that they have insufficient manpower, and are encountering too much internal resistance, to gain effective control. Indeed, in the same report cited above, Gorev also told Voroshilov that the advisors' work in Spain is "greatly hampered by the fact that we cannot do a great many necessary things because of our official position." What the actual level of Soviet advisory control over the Republican army was may be hard to ever objectively quantify. Michael Alpert, who has struggled with the question perhaps more than any other scholar, offers the following summation:

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We cannot extract affirmative conclusions in this matter. It is certain that there

were Russian advisors, and a half-dozen division-level generals is a very high number indeed. It can be assumed that they offered advice, usually through interpreters, and that having expressed their opinions, these tended to coincide quite often with those of the Spanish officials. When they did not coincide, it is impossible to know whether or not the Russian point of view tended to win out. In the final analysis, we might ask ourselves if the issue itself is not a little byzantine, since in fact one cannot say that at any particular moment a distinctive Spanish or Russian opinion had a decisive effect. [5](#)



Regardless of the degree of sway held by the Soviets, in some areas their contribution was undoubtedly enormous. One of these was the organization of the defense of Madrid, the first major operation in which Soviet officers and technicians participated. The battles around Madrid, which continued from October 1936 to January 1937, coincided with the first arrivals of significant Soviet aid. Given the major role played in these battles by  the Soviet aviation and mechanized units, it is hardly a surprise that the Soviet advisory corps would have assumed a central role in organizing the defensive plan. It should also be admitted, however, that many Soviet advisors on the ground had little confidence in the Spaniards' ability to organize their own defense. Betraying a paranoia that was commonplace in many internal dispatches, in October 1936 Antonov-Ovseenko described preparations this way:

The Madrid government and General Staff have shown a startling incapacity for the elementary organization of defense.... In Madrid no serious purge of suspect elements is visible. No political work and no preparation of the population for the difficulty of a possible siege or assault is noticeable.... They have put together a good plan for the defense of Madrid, but almost nothing has been done to put this plan into practice.... [6](#)

In part due to the widespread belief among the Soviets that the Spanish Republicans were not competent to organize the defense of their capital city, the Soviet advisors soon came to dominate the defense preparations. The Soviet leadership sought to emphasize early on the vital strategic and psychological importance of repelling the rebel offensive from Madrid. As they reminded the Loyalists in a consistently condescending manner, the Russians knew first-hand the implications of an enemy advance on a capital city. In a 16 October 1936 coded telegram to the Soviet military attaché in Spain, the Defense Commissariat drew on its experience from World War I and the Russian Civil War to recommend that armed fortifications be placed at strategic intervals on the approaches to the capital. [7](#) Moscow's recommendations were evidently quickly put into action, and three defensive lines were constructed at various intervals radiating away from the city center: the first at a distance of 20-35 km, the second at 12-14 km, and the third at 6-8 km. On each of these fortified lines, Republican engineers erected gun stations and other defensive barricades. [8](#) As late as December 1936, after the citizenry had already survived the most punishing attacks of the previous months, Voroshilov insisted that the capital continue to be the first priority of Soviet advisors in Spain:

All of your work and the work of all advisors must be directed towards the completion of this fundamental task—driving the enemy from Madrid. Everything else must be subordinate to the fulfillment of this task. Special attention should be paid to the material maintenance of the Madrid front. Its supply must be afforded a privileged position, in particular weapons and military supplies.... [9](#)

According to many accounts, the key figure in the defense of Madrid was Gorev himself who, in contrast to some of the Soviets who served in Spain, appears to have been universally well regarded. Admirers of his work on the Madrid front include Enrique Castro, I. G. Starinov, Ilya Ehrenburg, Ovadii Savich, and the American, Louis Fischer, who often credited Gorev with saving the capital.<sup>10</sup> On the breadth of his subordinate's abilities, Berzin reported the following, possibly inflated assessment:

In reality, Gorev prompts the general [Miaja] in all tactical decisions, he handles negotiations with various organizations regarding the mobilization of men and munitions for the defense of the city, gives military advice, maintains liaisons with all participants on the Madrid front, and never gives the old man [Miaja] any reason for alarm. He tends to spend the entire day with units at the front. Wherever added pressure is needed, or a counterattack necessary, he comes running.... He is very intelligent and bold—bold to the point of madness.<sup>11</sup>

Ehrenburg, in the same vein, concurred, noting that Gorev:

seldom found himself in the Ministry's cellar, but was on the front the entire time. Not yet forty years old, he already had extensive military experience. Clever, powerful but at the same time passionate—I should say, poetically inclined—he possessed great power over men. One believed him, or better said, believed in him.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from the successive battles around Madrid, Soviet advisors played key roles in several of the other more important operations prosecuted by the Republic, most of which will be handled separately in the discussion of the Soviet pilots and tankers below.

## **II. Organization of the International Brigades**

The organization of the International Brigades (IB) was technically the work of the Comintern, and not the Soviet government nor any of its ministries. Nonetheless, the central role of Soviet or Soviet-trained advisors in all matters concerning the IB command apparatus merits a brief digression on this topic.

Despite recent archival declassifications, the origins of the IB remain somewhat elusive. It cannot be doubted that the Comintern's August and September 1936 calls for international solidarity with the Republic and humanitarian fundraising also had a military dimension. It was observed above that on 3 August the Comintern passed the first resolution for a "wide campaign of solidarity with the fighters defending the Republic in Spain."<sup>13</sup> The call was strengthened at the 22 September session, when Codovilla told the ECCI that, "it is necessary to hasten the international solidarity a little, not only in discourse, but something more concrete."<sup>14</sup> In the seven weeks between these two sessions, the Comintern began recruiting an international army to fight in Spain.

The focal point for the early recruitment of the IB was Paris, with the organizational aspects handled jointly by the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Italian Communist Party in exile (PCI).<sup>15</sup> The initial leadership was headed by André Marty, the head of the PCF, a representative in the Chamber of Deputies and a member of the ECCI. His assistant was PCI stalwart Luigi Longo (a.k.a. "Gallo"), who had been active in Spain since shortly after the Nationalist uprising.<sup>16</sup> Numerous other foreign Communist nationals also took part in mobilizing international cadres, issuing recruitment quotas to national parties and cells throughout the world, and overseeing their transport to the Spanish border. Among the most active of the early organizers was the Yugoslav Josip Broz (a.k.a. "Tito").

It is striking to note the obvious similarity between the ECCI's call for general solidarity with the Republic and its recruitment of an international army. In both cases, the Comintern took pains to conceal its own organizing role in the actions. As we have seen, the Soviet leadership deceitfully presented the massive humanitarian drive both at home and abroad as a spontaneous act of the people.<sup>17</sup> In forming the IB, the ECCI did precisely the same

thing: staunchly denying that the convergence on Paris of thousands of young Communists had anything to do with Comintern recruiting. Thus a British party worker declared that the IB "arose spontaneously in the minds of men," and that from "the spontaneous movement of the volunteers there naturally arose the decision to form the International Brigades." [18](#)

Though many Communist propagandists doggedly continued—and continue—to adhere to the notion that the International Brigades formed spontaneously, even during the war itself some Comintern members openly admitted the central role of the ECCI. [19](#) Widespread Soviet frankness, however, took somewhat longer. It was not until the late 1960s that Moscow stated that the ECCI had made the decision in September 1936 "to locate among the workers of different countries volunteers with military experience and send them to fight in Spain." [20](#)

The IB training base in Spain was established near the town of Albacete. It was here that the first 500 volunteers began their service on 14 October 1936. The date is significant—just two days after the *Komsomol* arrived in Cartagena with fifty tanks. [21](#) Over the course of the war, as many as 35,000 foreigners would stream through the Albacete base on their way to the front. [22](#) These volunteers were overseen by Comintern agents operating under orders from Moscow, in a manner identical to that of the general Soviet advisory apparatus under Operation X. Soviet advisors assigned to various sections of the Republic's military structure invariably worked with the International Brigades as well. [23](#)

### III. Military Industry Advisors

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The Republic's inability to purchase large quantities of arms from any country save the USSR, coupled with the rebel naval blockade of its ports, made the need for expanded domestic arms production particularly critical. Despite having sat out the First World War, Spain had some experience in the manufacture of modern weaponry, including the development of an experimental tank, the Trubia-A, which first appeared in 1926. [24](#) During the civil war, however, Republican efforts to convert industry to military production was handicapped by three factors. First, the military spending cutbacks of the Azaña government had effectively crippled future domestic production by severely limiting the technological modernization of the defense industries. [25](#) Second, the ever-shrinking Republican zone and the eventual loss of the northwestern industrial regions created a shortage of raw materials to manufacture arms. Third, the Nationalist naval blockade and frequent French unwillingness to maintain an open frontier prevented the Republic from importing vital industrial materials.

The Soviet leadership was kept well informed of the Republic's deficiencies in developing its military industry. This would not have been difficult, as it was a source of considerable hand-wringing within both the general staff and the Loyalist government. [26](#) In one of his first reports to the Foreign Commissariat, Antonov-Ovseenko implored Moscow to send a Soviet expert in mobilizing industry. [27](#) That the Soviets would consistently emphasize the need to expand local military production is not surprising; the Five-Year Plans in the Soviet Union were focused above all on the rapid development of a competitive military industry, though at a terrible human cost. According to the research of one Russian historian, the Soviets realized some early successes in their Iberian industrial efforts. Two Soviet advisors assisted Republican officials in converting a Barcelona automobile plant into one that could produce armored vehicles and repair Soviet tanks. [28](#) The same factory would also turn out rifles and machine-guns, albeit in very small quantities. Several other Soviet advisors performed similar functions: one worked in a Catalonian metallurgy shop which was soon producing armor sheets for military vehicles, [29](#) and two others were assigned to a former toy factory to assist Republican engineers to begin shell production for 105-mm artillery guns. [30](#)

Shell supply, meanwhile, posed a unique problem for the Republic, as the Loyalists' artillery weapons came from many different sources, and thus required ammunition of different calibers. Over the course of the war, more than a few Soviet specialists attempted to deal with this problem, though their work yielded mixed results. According to Antonov-Ovseenko, by the end of November 1936, cartridge production in Spain had been raised

five-fold, though no similar rate of production for shells was ever achieved. <sup>31</sup> Another source indicates that, by the end of 1937, workshops at the Cartagena naval base were producing 105-mm and 107-mm shells; at an Elche factory, 76-mm shells; and at a Valencia factory, shells of various calibers. <sup>32</sup>

Over time, the Republic was also able to produce armored vehicles, tanks, and planes. As in other areas of wartime conversion, advisors from the USSR were involved in this undertaking. By the middle of 1937, for example, the Soviet advisor assigned to vehicle conversion was working with a group of Spanish engineers to convert the Soviet truck model ZES-5 into an armored vehicle. <sup>33</sup> In a report to the Defense Commissariat, Shtern summarized the progress made in the area of war production:

Up to 1 September 1937, 130 armored vehicles have been turned out and approximately 20 tons of spare parts manufactured for the T-26. In September, October, and November of this year it is expected that 130 machine guns and 30 armored vehicles and trains will be produced. Production of airplane motors included 100 M-25 motors, 100 M-100 motors, 35 I-15 motors, 50 I-16 motors, 15 SB motors, 25 R-Zet motors, 16 SSS motors. 10 new I-15s were also produced. <sup>34</sup>

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In a memoir written after the war, the Republic's head of aviation, Ignacio Hidalgo de Cisneros, lauded the Soviet advisors for their assistance overseeing the Spanish military industry.

One of our biggest concerns during the war was organizing the production and repair of new aircraft. Thanks to the assistance rendered by the Soviet Union we were able to launch this project. By the end of the war ... we were turning out one Chato fighter [I-15] every day and one Mosca [I-16] every two days. While this was not many, it did allow us to partially compensate for those planes being lost. <sup>35</sup>

But Cisneros neglects to mention that few of the license-built fighters assembled in the Republic were ever delivered to the fighter squadrons, since most of these planes lacked machine-guns and engines. Out of one hundred I-16s constructed in factories at Alicante and Baniolas, only fourteen were delivered. <sup>36</sup> Indeed, in other quarters, Shtern and Cisneros' upbeat assessment of Republican military production was strongly disputed. In private meetings with Loyalist officials, the Soviet leadership frequently complained that, even with foreign assistance, the Republic's military industry was woefully under-developed. The Soviet tank commander Krivoshein, who was involved in a project to convert civilian vehicles into armored cars in early 1937, expressed dismay at the Republic's inability to rapidly bring converted production capacity on line:

Putting the production of armored cars right was extremely difficult, when everything was done and the authority of the Ministry of War in Barcelona needed to prepare/stockpile the oil and fuel—that took nearly a month. That was just for one little piece of paper. <sup>37</sup>

Over the course of the war, Moscow became increasingly exasperated with the Republic's tardiness in improving domestic munitions production. In March 1937, Marty reported to Dimitrov that the Loyalists had achieved little progress in the area of industrial conversion. The Comintern agent wrote: "The mobilization of military industry is proceeding very slowly." <sup>38</sup> At nearly the same time, Goren requested that Moscow send a specialist in military industry to the north, a matter he regarded as "very urgent." <sup>39</sup> The sentiment was echoed in April 1937 by Gaikis, the new ambassador to Valencia, <sup>40</sup> and underlined again in August by the divisional commander Meretskov. In a report to Moscow that circulated at the highest levels, the Soviet advisor issued a largely negative assessment:

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Com. Marty believes that, according to the information he has, the mobilization of industry in Spain is going through difficulties. Thus, lately, of the 240 industrial works in Barcelona, only 40 are working on defense and the remaining 200—are

occupied with whatever they like, just not military orders. Com. Marty believes that under conditions of an open naval blockade, this question acquires an especially important significance and proposes to put the matter decisively right.

[41](#)

Seven months later, during Pascua's heated February 1938 negotiations to win additional credit for the arms-starved Republic, the Soviets admonished the ambassador for relying too heavily on foreign arms and not sufficiently developing the potential for a domestic military industry. [42](#) According to Pascua's personal notes from the meeting, Stalin refused to listen to the ambassador's excuses and made explicit his disappointment:

You neither take seriously nor have a deep interest in your own [military] production. You could be doing much more. We'll give you the motorized equipment, since that is the most difficult. But you must develop your military industry. You will see that there are considerable economic repercussions. [43](#)

The Republic's inability to overcome its early handicaps in developing a domestic military industry was interpreted by Moscow as one of the key failings both of Soviet-Spanish cooperation and of the advisory apparatus itself. In a report to the ECCI in November 1938—just months before the end of the war—the advisor Gerö complained that the Spanish military industry had never been adequately developed. [44](#) Elsewhere, however, the assessment was far more extreme, and more insidious. As the advisors' avowed goal of creating a self-sustaining local munitions industry appeared to be unrealizable, an increasing number of reports to Moscow fell back on allegations of internal 'wrecking'—a classic Stalinist denunciation tactic, often deployed in late-1930s Russia as a pretext for arrest or execution. Thus the economic attaché Stachevsky could explain the shortcomings of Republican industrial conversion efforts with the following sinister commentary:

While working on the military industry, I have met with such a large number of seditious instances of subtle wrecking that it is impossible to ascribe this to the casual wrecking of individual people; an organization is at work. [45](#)

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Unfortunately, verifiable details of any resulting purge remain buried in the former NKVD archives, still classified at this date.

#### IV. Naval Advisors

The paradox of Russian assistance in Republican waters is that, while the Soviet navy performed extremely well in meeting the logistical challenges of Operation X, the Soviet advisors assigned to the Republican navy were never able to convert that much-maligned branch into a proficient arm. The situation in the navy was quite unlike that in any other service branch, since it found itself effectively leaderless just days into the war. [46](#) Of the three primary Spanish naval bases, two—Cádiz and El Ferrol—were in rebel hands, while the Republic controlled only Cartagena. According to the research of Michael Alpert, the division of Spain left the Republic with one battleship, three cruisers, nine destroyers, seven torpedo boats, and twelve submarines. [47](#) While this was hardly an inconsequential fleet, its officer corps was practically non-existent, having been slaughtered by the enlisted men in the first days of the struggle.

Furthermore, from an early date the Republican navy's weaknesses were well known to the Soviet regime. Reports to the Defense Commissariat indicated that Republican seamen killed over 500 officers in the first days of the war. [48](#) As a result, in the initial phase of mobilizing Soviet officers for advising duties in Spain, one of Voroshilov's first actions was the appointment of Nikolai Kuznetsov as Soviet naval attaché. On 19 August, while conducting routine naval exercises in the Black Sea, Kuznetsov received notice to report immediately to the Red Army chief. According to his memoirs, when called to Moscow the admiral had no inkling of the assignment he was about to receive, and even less knowledge about the nascent Spanish conflict.

Without delay Kuznetsov was dispatched overland to Madrid, where he took up residence in

the Hotel Alfonso, one of the centers of Russian activity in the early days of the war. His initial impression of the Soviet operation in the Spanish capital is far from charitable; he characterized the command center as chaotic and practically leaderless. Despite multiple entreaties, he was unable to receive any concrete instructions, and spent several days wandering the streets of the city, attempting to size up the Republic's plight on his own and learn a bit of survival Spanish. It is not evident that any superior officer briefed Kuznetsov or supplied him with a useful situation dossier prior to his transfer to the coast, where he soon found himself in *de facto* command of the Republican fleet, a fact that was even more remarkable given that the seaman was barely into his thirties at the time. [49](#)

Upon his arrival at Cartagena, Kuznetsov discovered a disorganized, barely functioning naval force plagued by severe supply shortages. A report to the Defense Commissariat from 17 September 1936 indicated that Republican cruisers had only 80-100 torpedo shells each, and no reserve materials were available. An almost total lack of anti-aircraft munitions further restricted the fleet's potential. [50](#) An internal report several months later indicated no real improvement:

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[I]n all the institutions of the navy and on all vessels we estimate that there are around 40 senior officers, and moreover, there are just 12 drill officers. According to the report of our naval advisors N. Kuznetsov, V. Drozd and N. Anin, the remaining officers are technical specialists. There is not a single staff officer in the Republican navy. There are 4 second-class captains, 4 third-class captains and the rest are junior officers. Directly aboard vessels are 2 third-class captains, 3 captain-lieutenants (one of those is the commander of the navy; the other is the head of the navy's General staff). The navy's commander was previously the commander of a large port tugboat, while the staff's head of supply is just 11 years old! [51](#)

From an operational and tactical standpoint, the Republican fleet was woefully unprepared for the rigors of naval warfare. The few senior officers who had remained loyal to the Republic were products of an archaic, practically obsolete school of seamanship, their training based on the lessons of the English and Italian navies in the First World War. Soviet advisors were astonished to find that the Republican navy did not change its codes after the uprising; for the first eight months of the war they used the same codes as the rebels. (To be sure, it is equally surprising that the Nationalists retained the old codes as well.) Moreover, few officers or seamen were trained to carry out the most basic naval exercises; advanced operations, such as coordinated attacks at night, were not even discussed. [52](#) Initial attempts by the Soviet advisors to implement reforms and begin training were widely resisted.

A communications crisis was doubtlessly part of the problem; of the first naval advisors assigned to Spain, none knew any Spanish, and only one was given a translator. Despite the critical importance of organizing marine defenses at Cartagena, the Soviets delayed at least one month in sending a translator to work with the advisors. [53](#) Ignoring the language issue, Kuznetsov explained the problems confronting him in a report to naval command in Leningrad:

[O]n the first question, decided in October 1936, regarding the necessity to start systematically undertaking military training and utilizing the periods between operations, the committee of naval commanders responded that they already knew how to fight! And as for studying during times of war—certainly not; it is dangerous! It proved necessary to tactfully demonstrate concrete examples that, in fact, the navy could not wage war, that it was unprepared and, indeed, would aimlessly perish. [54](#)

Once the Republican naval commanders were convinced of the need for a general overhaul, Soviet naval advisors set about organizing training programs for officers and recruits. Junior officers undertook the systematic study of all aspects of naval warfare, including navigation and artillery and torpedo firing. Seamen learned to man battle stations and were instructed in the basic use of equipment. One Soviet advisor, A. M. Gurevich, found that, in general, the recruits learned quickly. [55](#)

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The training program instituted in the fall of 1937 gradually yielded hard-won results. After two or three months of instruction, junior officers and seamen began assuming full responsibilities aboard Republican craft. This heightening of the Republicans' skill level also allowed for the slow transformation of the Soviets' role in the navy. When military aid began in October 1936, nearly all Soviets assigned to the navy were named commanders; by the beginning of 1938, all were serving as advisors.<sup>56</sup> Overall, however, the Soviets assigned to the navy were primarily interested in providing local port security for the weapons shipments arriving from the USSR, and in this area they were quite successful. The same advisors' attempts to oversee the transformation of the Loyalist navy into an efficient maritime fighting force was obstructed from the start by insufficient matériel and a critical shortage of qualified personnel, both Loyalist and Soviet. Apart from its admirable performance in the logistical support of Operation X, the Republic's navy remained the weakest link in the Loyalist services.

## V. Guerrilla Warfare, Military Intelligence, and Counter-Intelligence

Soviet advisors were also active as agents and instructors in guerrilla warfare, intelligence, and counterintelligence. In the first area, special training programs were overseen by the Soviet advisors in Barcelona and Valencia to prepare snipers, mine layers, machine-gunners, communications specialists, and intelligence gatherers for work behind rebel lines. After short periods of instruction under Soviet specialists, the Republican graduates of these training centers were organized into seven special brigades, all of which engaged exclusively in sabotage operations.<sup>57</sup> Chief advisor Berzin's report to the Defense Commissariat in the spring of 1937 indicated the impact of Republican guerrilla activity:

From January to March 1937, partisan groups on the Southern front were engaged in derailing operations on the Malaga-Cordoba-Seville line—17 trains were derailed which resulted in the destruction of 12 engines and some sixty wagons on each train; Over 500 people were killed. The most significant wreck came on January 23, 1937, 15 km west of Granada: an explosion damaged a railroad bridge, stopping traffic on the line for three days.<sup>58</sup>

Despite this apparent success, Soviet advisors rarely stressed guerrilla tactics in their work with the Republican army. This was a curious deficiency, as those acts of sabotage that were carried out often distressed Franco's lieutenants, and sent shockwaves through the Nationalist rear guard. Yet it would be a mistake to expect more from the Soviets in this area. Its invention in the Peninsular War notwithstanding, guerrilla warfare played a very minor role in the Spanish Civil War. Franco never employed guerrilla forces in any real sense, and the Republic never took their potential very seriously. It should be said, in defense of both sides, that military theorists had largely rejected the tactic as an anachronism after the trench warfare experience of the First World War.<sup>59</sup>

On the other hand, in the area of intelligence and counter-espionage, the Soviets in Spain went far beyond their dictated role as advisors. It must not be forgotten that the civil war in Spain coincided with the Stalinist terror. In this connection, Soviet agents in Spain were ordered to locate and root out the same alleged enemy elements that were being extinguished in the USSR. From the Kremlin's point of view, whether or not a real threat existed was as immaterial in Spain as it was in Moscow. Enemies were to be found, even if they had to be first created. Thus a part of the Stalinist machine of terror was exported to Spain, though the number of its victims remained small compared to the far-reaching purges at home.

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The Iberian version of the Kremlin's struggle against accused enemies of the Soviet Union reached its climax in May 1937, when members of the Catalan PSUC provoked a confrontation with the Marxist Workers Party (POUM), leading to the latter's partial destruction in pitched battles. In the weeks that followed, the POUM was formally banned and its leadership arrested, murdered, or disappeared. By the end of the month, no anarchist or non-conforming Marxist was safe from accusations of Trotskyism, as the Spanish Communists (together with their Russian taskmasters) sought out so-called saboteurs within the "fifth column"—the pro-Nationalist organization said to be deeply embedded within Republican ranks.

The details of the NKVD's machinations in Spain and its persecution and probable murder of an unknown number of Spaniards and international volunteers accused of being fifth-column supporters is revealed in explicit detail in many of the reports sent to Moscow by Comintern and GRU operatives working the Loyalist zone. Several dozen of these reports are available in the recently published Habeck and Radosh document collection, and they make for a sobering read. It is striking to note the degree of paranoia exhibited by many of these advisors, who were quick to condemn the slightest error or mistake as a brazen act of sabotage. Very often, the accused were denounced with the term 'wrecker'—a standard tactic of Stalinist condemnation to link undesirable elements to Trotskyist nonconformity.

The extent to which the Soviet contingent pursued Moscow's anti-Trotskyist agenda in Spain is in part revealed in a May 1937 report by Slutskii, head of the foreign section of the NKVD, recounting the arrest of spies and other undesirables in the Republican zone:

With the purpose of carrying out sabotage work in Spain in the enemy's rearguard ... 4 schools have been organized in order to train the following qualified agents: in Valencia, 50 agents; in Barcelona, 25 agents; in Bilbao, 25 agents; in Archena, 25 agents. Our estimates suggest that as of the first days of May [1937] approximately 200 trained individuals are available.... From January to April 1937 we took the following measures: ... As a result of our direct participation, numerous serious espionage and fascist organizations were exposed. In Madrid, we exposed the organization "Unión Española" (arresting 100 people), "Falange Española" (arresting 30 people), "Organization 40" (intellectuals).... We have organized special sections of the NKVD, and have created branches in several cities. In Valencia, Cartagena, Alicante and other cities we are exposing a large number of serious organizations. [60](#)

Marcelino Pascua, the Republic's ambassador to Moscow, also provided confirmation of NKVD activity in Spain. In a coded telegram dated 8 December 1937, Pascua warned Prime Minister Negrín that a number of Soviets suspected of being police agents had recently been issued visas for travel to Spain. The names of probable NKVD agents, he added, would follow separately in the diplomatic pouch. [61](#)

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A brief digression is at this point necessary to discuss Aleksandr Orlov, the most important Soviet official in Spain to defect to the West during the civil war. According to Orlov himself, he was the head NKVD man in Spain beginning in September 1936. While his name comes up frequently in the secondary literature on the war, a clear picture of this shadowy figure never quite emerges. He remains the most elusive of all the Soviets sent to Spain, barely mentioned in any reliable account of the war, and almost never in declassified reports from Soviet agents in the field. The brief version of Louis Fischer, which tells us almost nothing, is typical:

Rosenberg introduced me to two Embassy secretaries, Orlov and Belayev. I sat with them in a room and discussed Russia. Something made me talk about the GPU, and from the way they listened I knew that my guess was right: they were GPU men. Orlov, I later learned, was the chief of the GPU agents in Loyalist territory. He spoke English well, dressed dapperly, was good-looking and very intelligent. He also went by the name of Liova. [62](#)

Orlov himself left several eyewitness documents of questionable veracity, including the 1953 *Secret History of Stalin's Crimes* and a series of articles in *Life* magazine. Orlov was also interviewed twice, and his testimony on a number of issues related to the Soviet intervention forms an important part of his legacy. [63](#) Recent archival declassifications have proved Orlov to have occasionally been more accurate than scholars have given him credit for. His approximate dates for the commencement of Soviet military assistance, for example, have by and large been verified. On the other hand, his account of the extent of Soviet counter-intelligence and guerrilla operations in Spain may now be dismissed as greatly exaggerated, as there is little evidence to suggest that the Kremlin possessed the logistical sophistication, much less the manpower, to carry out large-scale operations of this nature. [64](#) Further illumination of Orlov's participation in NKVD terror activities in Spain awaits further declassifications in the former KGB (now FSB) archives, but it is odd indeed that after a dozen years of open access in the Russian Military archive (RGVA) no researcher

has to date produced any evidence of Orlov's activities during the civil war. For an agent sometimes touted as the most powerful Soviet in Spain, he left no fingerprints whatsoever.  
[65](#)

Nonetheless, materials already available remove any doubt that some of the Soviet and Comintern agents working in Spain were responsible for unpardonable offenses, targeting innocent "fascist conspirators," who in nearly all cases were nothing of the sort, but were simply unsuspecting victims whose political affiliations had been condemned by the ideological straitjacket of Stalinism. While Soviet-sponsored practices of arrest, torture, and murder should be exposed as completely as the documentation allows, one must take care not to exaggerate the extent of these crimes, nor permit a finite number of excesses to form the sole basis for a broader assessment of Operation X. However odious some examples undoubtedly were, Soviet secret police actions in Spain were delimited both geographically and chronologically, confined mainly to Barcelona and its environs (or occasionally Madrid), and occurred primarily during a few periodic bursts of frenzied activity. The very small number of Soviet agents present in Spain who would have been occupied with campaigns of ideologically motivated terror placed major restrictions on their extent and duration.

Reading the post-Soviet declassified records, as well as the vast general literature on the civil war, one reaches the conclusion that, however attractive the exportation of Stalinist terror to the Loyalist zone may have seemed to various paranoid or sinister Comintern or Politburo officials, all evidence suggests that such campaigns were never given very high priority. Moreover, like nearly all other aspects of the Soviet intervention, the policy of terror was easy enough to conceive in the Kremlin, but, in practice, even NKVD campaigns tended to be poorly supported on the ground and were only half-heartedly implemented.

## VI. Political Commissars

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Occupying a position quite distinct from other advisors, given their focus on their fellow Russians, was a small group of Soviet personnel sent to Spain in the capacity of political commissars. Some writers have long claimed that these individuals were appointed to assist the Spaniards in installing political commissars at the brigade and corps level of the Popular Army, an assertion doubted by Michael Alpert, whose extensive work in the Spanish military archives puts him in a unique position to address the institutional evolution of the Loyalist armed forces. On the political control mechanisms within the Popular Army, Alpert writes the following:

The commissar system arose naturally in ... the army. The title should not lead to the assumption that it was a Soviet imposition. The Republican battalions of militia usually had political leaders who cooperated more or less with the professional NCOs and officers. As the militia were brought under military law, it became advisable to maintain the political officer and this was done by a decree at the beginning of Largo Caballero's leadership. [66](#)

This decree was made public on 17 October 1936, more than a month following the first appearance in Madrid of key Soviet military attachés, though before the arrival of the main contingent of Soviet advisors and instructors, and before any Russian hardware had entered action on the side of the Republic. [67](#) Unsurprisingly, Gorev, the chief Soviet advisor on the ground in Spain, claimed complete credit for the advent of the commissar system, gloating to Voroshilov that the breakthrough came "as a result of protracted negotiations and constant pressure," but this assertion should be treated with skepticism, as there is no compelling evidence to support the claim. [68](#)

Soviet commissars were indeed sent to Spain, but their primary task—perhaps their sole assignment—was overseeing political indoctrination among the Soviet airmen, tankers, technicians, lower-ranking advisors, and other support staff deployed by Section X in Spain. From the first days of Soviet involvement in the war, it was clear that Moscow was apprehensive at the prospect of having so many Soviet military specialists working in a Western country alongside volunteers from progressive democracies. In October 1936, a directive from Voroshilov stated that "our people keenly require a special person to whom the fighter may turn to apply for explanations and advice." [69](#) This euphemistic statement

meant, of course, that Soviet participants in the war required careful monitoring to ensure that their political allegiance underwent no sudden alteration. To perform this task, Section X dispatched NKVD agents to provide political training to Soviet participants in Spain. [70](#) The main objectives of Soviet political workers in the Republic were described in a report to the Defense Commissariat by F. A. Agaltsov:

1. Provide our people with continuous courses created in the homeland ... provide explanations of the political party and government... 2. Provide our people with a course on international events ... provide political indoctrination and occasionally raise questions on international problems... 4. Provide explanations of the character of the revolution and struggle in Spain. Towards this end we will study articles and reports provided by the Spanish Communist Party, as well as speeches by Dimitrov in Pravda and the journal Komintern. This will be supplemented by collections of articles from the Spanish Communist Party newspaper Frente Rojo (in translation). [71](#)

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In order to implement this program, the Soviets shipped a variety of printed materials to Spain. In the first months of 1938, for example, Section X dispatched 200 issues of *Khudozhestvennaya literatura*, 50 copies of a Bolshevik party history, 10 copies of a six-volume collection of Lenin's writings, and 250 copies of a Red Army textbook on political training. [72](#) Some of this agit-prop literature was supplied to the Amigos de la URSS for distribution among local chapters (as discussed above in Chapter Seven), although part of it was almost certainly intended for Soviet military personnel.

Despite these efforts, there is little evidence that Moscow made political training among the Soviets in Spain a high priority. The long hours worked by the Soviet airmen and tankers precluded intensive political training, and few advisors could be spared from other assignments to assist in political work. According to Tolmachaev's research, military archive records indicate that a total of only nine Soviet political workers were sent to Spain over the course of the war. [73](#) Moreover, at least one political worker sent to Spain complained to Voroshilov that he was inadequately supported and was unable to implement a coherent plan of education due to lack of direction and material support from the center:

I ask you to enlighten us more often concerning the immediate tasks in the Socialist construction of the USSR and questions on the international situation, otherwise it is very difficult to work: there is nowhere to receive orientation here. As usual, I am awaiting additional newspapers, literature, military books and magazines. [74](#)

It is instructive that this letter was written in late October 1937, at the same time that Moscow was rapidly scaling back its propaganda efforts among the Spanish people. [75](#) It is also worth noting that agit-prop work within the International Brigades had practically ground to a halt at the same time. A Comintern report to Dimitrov from late July 1937 indicated that "political work among the volunteers continues to be very weak.... Cadre work in the brigades, as earlier, is beneath every criticism. Neither in Albacete nor in the CC of the Communist Party of Spain is there any real organ that might devote itself to cadres." [76](#)

Overall, we are left to conclude that in this area, as in many others, the Soviets were ill equipped to fully meet the challenge before them, and in the space of a year largely abandoned the task of political work among all cadres, either Red Army technicians, *brigadistas*, or indeed the general Loyalist population. Moreover, as will be made evident below, the Kremlin had other means of ensuring allegiance from its men in the field: first, the regular withdrawal after short tours of Soviets sent to serve in Spain; and second, the issuing of repeated and unambiguous threats of disciplinary action to all personnel engaged in Operation X.

## VII. Communications Engineers and Advisors

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Communications teams constituted one of the most numerous groups of Soviet personnel

sent to Spain. Between November 1936 and March 1939, 167 wireless operators, radio specialists, radio intelligence specialists, and signalers from the USSR served in the Republican cause.<sup>77</sup> These workers were engaged in providing radio communications between both Moscow and its personnel in Spain and between the Soviet advisors to the Republican general staff and those scattered across the various fronts of the war and aboard Republican naval craft. Other wireless teams were occupied solely with intelligence. All aspects of the communications enterprise in Spain were overseen by the Wireless Service of the Soviet Defense Ministry (ORD NKO).<sup>78</sup> The Wireless Service began sending personnel and equipment to Spain with the first shipments of military assistance in October 1936. The first commander of the Soviet radio installation in Spain was A. N. Makarenko. The workers under his command included communications specialists gathered from various branches of the Red Army and other Soviet institutions, including the Soviet navy, the merchant marine, short-wave radio organizations, and land forces, as well as recent graduates of Soviet military training schools and academies. All were thoroughly trained in Moscow by the ORD NKO and briefed by Section X prior to their departure. The final selection process was rigorous, and not all trainees ultimately received the Spanish assignment. Factors such as professional preparation, mental attitude, and physical condition all played a role in weeding out candidates.<sup>79</sup>

By 31 October, a skeleton crew of nine workers had arrived in Spain and was actively constructing relay stations; another eight arrived a week later.<sup>80</sup> By the middle of November, the chief military advisor, I. K. Berzin, was able to communicate directly with Moscow via the new radio link. Several Soviet journalists in Spain were also permitted to use the radio installation to send stories to the USSR.<sup>81</sup> It should be noted once again, however, that the radio link would prove unreliable over the course of the war, with serious implications for Moscow's ability to communicate with its advisors on the ground in Spain.<sup>82</sup>

A key responsibility of the Soviet communications teams was setting up radio links during major military operations so that Soviet advisors in the field could stay in constant contact with their superiors at the general staff and in Moscow. One wireless technician, L. V. Dolgov, recalled the duties of the team during the Brunete offensive in the summer of 1937:

The enemy was already at the approaches to the town when the chief military advisor G. M. Shtern arrived at this section of the front.... We immediately established a mobile radio station and quickly secured a link directly to the center [general staff]. Our work included dispatching continuous updates on the flights of the enemy's air force. Notwithstanding the difficult conditions, our radio station fully carried out its assignment of providing an uninterrupted radio link. Despite frequent changes of the station's location, information was sent on without delay. On one occasion we were installed under a road in a flood tunnel. The chief advisor found the work of the wireless operators ... to be of high value.<sup>83</sup>

Other Soviet communications workers were placed aboard Republican naval vessels to coordinate attacks. In March 1938, the participation of Soviet wireless operators on the *Libertad* and *Almirante Antequera* allowed the Republic to score a major victory—the sinking of one of the rebels' best cruisers, the *Baleares*.<sup>84</sup> The most effective use of the wireless operators, however, was in the area of intelligence. On 22 February 1937, Section X chief Uritskii reported to Voroshilov on the results of Soviet wireless intelligence work in Spain:

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In November 1936 a group of our commanders and intelligence officers organized a radio intelligence service detachment for the Spanish army. Work began in December 1936 with the deployment of [wireless] receiving centers in Rocaforre (8 km NW of Valencia), a northern group in Barcelona, a southern group in Villaflora (6 km NW of Murcia) and a reserve group in Torrejon de Ardos.

The results of the work:

1. The detection and determination of the location of 45 Francoist military sub-units in the Central front, 7 military sub-units in the Aragon front, 9 in the

- Northern, 18 in the Southern front, as well as formations on the Balearic islands, in Morocco and on the Canary islands.
2. The discovery of organizations and destruction of the following Francoist aviation forces: 8 groups of intelligence officers, 3 groups of bombers, 1 group of fighter aircraft, 5 aerial detachments, 3 groups of hydroplanes and several auxiliary units.
  3. The radio intelligence service sends reports to the General staff approximately two times each day. According to the communiqués of our advisors, these reports provide highly reliable intelligence on the enemy. [85](#)

This report highlighted some of the obvious achievements of the communications teams, but overall the success of the group was not remarkable. In their most fundamental responsibilities—securing reliable communications between the Defense Commissariat and the chief military advisor, and between that individual and the advisors in the field—their performance barely rose to an acceptable level. As we shall see in Chapter Seventeen, the work of the advisors in Spain was continuously handicapped by serious breakdowns in communications. For the most part, the fault of this deficiency lay not with the men on the ground in the Republic, but rather in the insurmountable logistical problems that confronted the planners of Operation X.

## VIII. The Linguistic Unit: Translators and Interpreters

Interpreters represented an even larger group of Soviet support staff in Spain. With few notable exceptions, the bulk of advisors and military specialists dispatched by Section X for service in Spain had no familiarity with the Spanish language. [86](#) A large number of translators and interpreters were therefore essential for effective collaboration between Soviets and Spaniards. Gorev quite sensibly recommended that each advisor be given his own interpreter, but nothing remotely close to this goal was ever achieved. A total of 204 interpreters, most of whom were women, eventually served in Spain. Two of the interpreters were killed, and another was reported missing in action. [87](#) In general, interpreters saw longer tours than pilots, tankers, and advisors; indeed, many served for an entire year. By all accounts, the group played a critical role in Operation X, but they were too few in number, and too insufficiently trained, to provide the level of coverage needed by the Soviet men on the ground.

In Chapter Six, it was observed that, during the initial cultural exchanges of the early 1930s, VOKS officials sought complete control over all translation and interpreting enterprises associated with Soviet-Spanish cultural rapprochement. [88](#) VOKS steadfastly refused to work with any Russian émigrés living in Spain who sought employment or who were recommended as interpreters. During the war, Moscow's intransigent position on the linguistic front was much the same. Despite the presence in the Republic of a modest though not inconsequential number of qualified Russophones—many of whom had translated works for publication or had taught Russian—Section X insisted that only Soviet nationals or loyal international Communists trained in the USSR be permitted to work as interpreters in Spain. In excluding Spaniards from the pool of potential interpreters, Moscow found itself hard-pressed to find a sufficient number of specialists trained to work in the two languages, in large part due to the paucity of qualified Hispanists residing in the USSR. In 1936, the Hispanic world was still largely unknown to the Soviets; as late as 1932, VOKS was still using French in its correspondence with Spanish-speakers, and the first Soviet Russian-Spanish dictionary was not published until 1934. [89](#)

To find interpreters for the Spanish war, the Defense Commissariat appointed a special committee to oversee the selection process. Candidates were chosen from among recent graduates of language programs in universities and institutes in Moscow, Leningrad, and the Far East. [90](#) A few, like the Argentine Adelina Abramson, were native Spanish speakers who had immigrated to the Soviet Union since the Revolution. [91](#) But not all the interpreters selected had thorough familiarity with the Spanish language; prior to their departure, many attended a three-month intensive training course in Moscow.

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Over the course of the war, the Defense Commissariat devoted approximately ten percent

of its total personnel to interpretive and translation work, a far cry from Gorev's target of a one-to-one ratio. In the first stage of Soviet military assistance, a lack of qualified translators meant that a very small number of interpreters were engaged in the Republican zone; for example, of the 396 Soviets in Spain on 5 November 1936, just 14 were in the linguistic unit.<sup>92</sup> This meant that even high-ranking Soviet commanders were left to negotiate the kaleidoscopic chaos of the Republic's improvised defenses without the aid of a trained linguist. Kuznetsov, who was chief naval advisor beginning in late August 1936, spent his first week in Spain in bewildered confusion, wandering Madrid on his own, attempting to learn a few Spanish words while assessing the Republic's military situation.<sup>93</sup> Even after he had assumed control of the Loyalist navy, Kuznetsov still possessed no interpreter, and could barely communicate with his advisees. The advisor recalled the predicament thus: "My scant vocabulary only allowed me to speak on general themes, and only then with the help of gestures."<sup>94</sup> As late as mid-October, Gorev was lamenting in a report to Voroshilov that he had no translator available to send to Cartagena.

Most other advisors reported similar experiences, though—curiously, it must be said—rarely in anything other than a comical light. The armored warfare instructor Krivoshein, charged with running the school for Loyalist tank crews at Archena, was assigned no interpreter, and openly confessed that none of his Soviet unit had even a rudimentary knowledge of Spanish. He relates humorous anecdotes reinforcing the communication crisis in his account with relish—as is so often the case in the Soviet memoir literature—yet Krivoshein fails to point out that the lack of a lingua franca among teachers and students might have played a role in the tactical disaster that was the armored brigade's baptism on the Madrid front in late October.<sup>95</sup> In sum, the language issue, though never discussed in serious terms in the postwar published literature, constituted a serious brake on the effectiveness of the advisors' work in Spain.

Only by the autumn of 1937 were more interpreters on site in the Loyalist zone. In September 1937 Shtern reported that, of the 557 Soviets in Spain, 57 were interpreters.<sup>96</sup> By then, however, Section X had relaxed some of its more severe restrictions on who it would allow to serve as a translator. A report in October 1937, for example, refers to the active presence of "White emigrant" translators. These were the same Russian exiles with whom, several years earlier, VOKS had refused to collaborate in its language programs at Madrid's Ateneo.<sup>97</sup>

The increase in the numbers of available interpreters was in part due to the opening of a training school directly in the Republican zone, where newly arrived Soviet interpreters could polish their skills before being assigned to work with Soviet advisors and other participants in the field. Non-Soviet international Communists also trained here, and were incorporated into the translator pool. The school, which began operation in the summer of 1937, was initially led by two senior Soviet Hispanists, Olga Nikolaeva Filippova [Autand Lusia Pokrovskaya]. Nikolaeva was the head of the Spanish section of VOKS throughout the early 1930s and probably the most capable Hispanist the Soviets were able to engage in an official capacity. It was she who answered much of the correspondence to VOKS from individual Spaniards in the early 1930s (cited above in Chapter Six), and she had been among the first interpreters sent to Spain.

While the opening of a language school in the Republic might have seemed to some a solution to the critical shortage of translators, the general opinion expressed in confidential reports to Moscow was one of disappointment. One letter, written in late September 1937, offered the following withering progress report:

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The problem of the translators is still not resolved. The organizational school here has not justified itself. Recruitment was unsuccessful, people were not vetted, the leaders of this school (Olga Nikolaeva and others) were not suited for their appointment. Now the school has been let out and enrollment has started again; a new leadership is being appointed.<sup>98</sup>

Thus it appears that the school initially operated for less than two months, possibly less. The reasons for its rapid demise may well be revealed in the unpublished memoir of one translator who served in Spain, R. A. Zernova. She indicates that the critical shortage of trained linguists—even after a year of Soviet involvement in Spain—meant that "the

teachers not only gave language training and reading lessons, but ... also clandestinely worked in radio-interception." <sup>99</sup> The pattern that held true for most of the advisory staff thus applied to the top interpreters as well: their responsibilities were so diluted by multiple tasks that their overall performance palpably suffered.

In any event, none of the efforts to clear the linguistic hurdle were effectively addressed. In the summer of 1937, despite an increased overall number of qualified interpreters working with the Soviets when compared to the previous year, many Russian advisors still had no linguist assigned to them. The experience of the aviation advisor Yakushin was typical after his arrival in Murcia in June 1937. Yakushin reported that, with no interpreter given to his group, he and his countrymen were forced to improvise in the local language as they attempted to communicate with their Republican charges. Without any prior training in Spanish, however, this arrangement was unsatisfactory, and could on occasion lead to chaos in the field. Indeed, the advisor related with comic flourish the potentially disastrous consequences of this pattern of non-communication. In one case, an Austrian flyer navigated his I-15 fighter in endless circles above the airfield after having misunderstood an order given by the Russian expert <sup>100</sup> —an amusing anecdote perhaps, but also a damning commentary on the harmful repercussions of the general incompetence the Soviets displayed in planning and implementing Operation X, even after nearly a year in the field. How many lost or captured aircraft and injured or killed flyers, one wonders, resulted from this basic problem of communication?

Neither the primary nor secondary sources on the civil war have many illuminating references to the work of the Soviet women who served as interpreters in Spain. The linguistic team is sometimes singled out in the multi-volume Soviet history, *Guerra y Revolución en España*, but they are largely left out of Western accounts of the conflict. <sup>101</sup> One of the few appraisals of their work in the archival record is Shtern's September 1937 report to the Defense Commissariat:

I believe it my debt to add a comment for comrades Stalin and Voroshilov on the work of our Soviet female interpreters. They were chosen for Spain on the strength of a single factor—their knowledge of the language; thus, they are not a group of specially-trained people. The interpreters go everywhere with their commanders, and they are exposed to the same battle dangers. I have often observed these women in the most difficult situations, under conditions of bombings, machine-gunning and artillery fire, and on not one occasion have I witnessed any cowardice. These heroic women delight the Spaniards. They do their work calmly and have enormously assisted our commanders. Among the bravest and most faithful is Sofia Bessmertnaia, who died heroically at Brunete. <sup>102</sup>

Shtern's assessment, of course, ignores the main issue—the shortage of qualified interpreters—which Moscow was never able to overcome. Elsewhere in the declassified official Soviet records of the war, there is ample evidence that the quantity and quality of the linguistic unit was never capable of meeting all the challenges before it. Repeated confidential reports to the Defense Commissariat indicate that the Soviet advisors and personnel in the field required many more translators for their work to be effective, but Moscow could not fulfill this level of commitment. Of course, the issue of insufficient personnel was a perennial problem for the Soviets during the course of their Spanish adventure, not only among the linguistic unit and military advisors, but among the direct combat participants—the pilots and tankers—as well. It is to these groups that we turn our focus in the next two chapters.

### Notes:

**Note 1:** ECCI decision of 23 July 1936. 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, or RTsKhIDNI), f. 495, op. 18, del. 1101, l. 15. [Back](#).

**Note 2:** A. Samarin, *Bor'ba za Madrid* (Moscow: Gos. voennoi. izdat, 1940), 21-3. The

original draft of the plan is in TsAMO, f. 132, op. 2642, del. 82, II. 197-205. [Back.](#)

**Note 3:** M. T. Meshcheriakov, "Narodnaia armia Ispanskoi respubliki," *Voprosy istorii* 11 (1979): 48. [Back.](#)

**Note 4:** Gorev to Voroshilov, 16 Oct. 1936; unnamed source. Reproduced in Mary Habeck and Ronald Radosh, *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 67. [Back.](#)

**Note 5:** Michael Alpert, *El ejército republicana en la guerra civil*, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno, 1989), 244. In the original, Alpert's passage reads as follows: "Así pues, no podemos extraer afirmaciones concluyentes al respecto. Es cierto que había asesores rusos, y media docena de generales de División es un número muy elevado. Es presumible que hiciesen comentarios, la mayor parte de las veces a través de intérpretes, y que diesen su opinión, y es probable que sus opiniones coincidiesen muy a menudo con las de los oficiales españoles. Cuando no era así, es imposible saber si las opiniones rusas predominaban siempre o no. En último análisis, podemos preguntarnos si no se trata más bien de una discusión bizantina, pues no se puede decir que en ningún momento la preponderancia de una opinión española o ruso tuviese efectos decisivos." [Back.](#)

**Note 6:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 832, II. 196-200. Quoted in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 121-22. [Back.](#)

**Note 7:** TsAMO, f. 132, op. 2642, d. 192, II. 1-2. Cited in Iurii E. Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch' Sovetskogo Soiuza ispanskому narodu v natsional'no-revoliutsionnoi voine 1936-1939," Ph.D. diss. (Institute of Military History, Moscow, 1992), 104. [Back.](#)

**Note 8:** V. F. Shperk, *Istoriia fortifikatsii* (Moscow: Gos. voennoe izdat, 1957), 258-59. Cited in Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch'," 104. [Back.](#)

**Note 9:** TsAMO, f. 132, op. 2642, del. 192, I. 26. Cited in Ribalkin, "Voennaia pomoshch'," 104. [Back.](#)

**Note 10:** See Louis Fischer, *Men and Politics* (London: Cape, 1941), 362 and 398. For a discussion of Gorev's reputation, see Burnett Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution in Spain, 1936-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 489-91. Somewhat more hyperbolic is Starinov's memoir *Over the Abyss* (New York: Ivy Books, 1995), 74-75. The following two sources are also illuminating: Robert Colodny, *The Struggle for Madrid: The Central Epic of the Spanish Conflict, 1936-37* (New York: Paine-Whitman, 1958), 75; and R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 49. [Back.](#)

**Note 11:** Quoted in D. Pritsker, "Revoliutsia i natsional'no-revolutionnaiia voina v Ispanii," Ph.D. diss. (Leningrad, 1963), 510-11. [Back.](#)

**Note 12:** Ilya Ehrenburg, *Menschen, Jahre, Leben: Memoiren* (East Berlin: Verlag Volk und Welt, 1978), vol. II: 402. [Back.](#)

**Note 13:** ECCI Protocol Nr. 64, 3 Aug. 1936. RGASPI, f. 495, op. 18, del. 1105, I. 1. [Back.](#)

**Note 14:** Codavilla report to ECCI, 22 Sept. 1936. RGASPI, f. 495, op. 2, del. 233, II. 56-99. [Back.](#)

**Note 15:** The best short introduction to the formation of the IB, and one which greatly informs the present discussion, is R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army*, 30-46. Very useful on this topic as well is Hugh G. Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 3rd ed. rev. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 452-562. [Back.](#)

**Note 16:** For Longo's version of the IB organization, see Luigi Longo, *Las Brigadas internacionales en España* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1966). [Back.](#)

**Note 17:** See Chapter Four. [Back.](#)

**Note 18:** William Rust, *Britons in Spain* (New York: International Publishers, 1939), 5-6; cited in R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army*, 32. [Back.](#)

**Note 19:** In September 1937, the CPUSA organ Daily Worker acknowledged that it had actively recruited cadres. See Richardson, *Comintern Army*, 32. [Back](#).

**Note 20:** *Komunisticheskii Internatsional: Kratkii istoricheskii ocherk* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1969), 460. [Back](#).

**Note 21:** For the arrival of the IB, see Thomas, *Spanish Civil War*, 456. On the establishment of the Albacete base, see Ricardo de la Cierva, *Brigadas Internacionales, 1936-1996: La verdadera historia: Mentira histórica y error de Estado* (Madrid: Editorial Fénix, 1997), 149-61. On Soviet arms deliveries, see M. T. Meshcheriakov, *Ispaniskaia respublika i Komintern: Natsional'no-revolutsionnaia voina ispanskogo naroda i politika kommunisticheskogo internatsionala, 1936-1939 gg.* (Moscow: Mysl', 1981), 52. The arrival of Soviet hardware is discussed in detail in Chapter Nine. [Back](#).

**Note 22:** This is the relatively conservative though by no means final estimate of Thomas (*Spanish Civil War*, 982-83). Declassified Soviet documents indicate as many as 50,000. See RGASPI, f. 495, op. 76, del. 33, l. 18. Cited in Novikov, *SSSR, Komintern i grazhdanskaia*, vol. II, 100. The estimates will be debated endlessly, though not here. [Back](#).

**Note 23:** Moscow's role in shaping and overseeing the IB is the subject in part of Habeck and Radosh's recent work, *Spain Betrayed*; see especially 233-60 and 431-73. The full story of the International Brigades and their commanding officers is, of course, an immensely complicated one, beyond the scope of the current project. The most important recent work on the IB, incorporating important declassified materials from RGASPI, is Cesar Vidal, *Las brigadas internacionales* (Madrid: Anaya & Mario Muchnik, 1999). [Back](#).

**Note 24:** On the mostly forgotten Trubia Serie A, see Javier de Mazarrasa, *Los carros de combate en la guerra de España, 1936-1939* (Valladolid: Quirón, 1998), vol. I: 99-104.. [Back](#).

**Note 25:** See Stanley G. Payne, *Spain's First Democracy: The Second Republic, 1931-1936* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 94. [Back](#).

**Note 26:** Indalecio Prieto, Largo Caballero's Minister of Air and Navy, was particularly preoccupied, and frustrated, by the issue. See Louis Fischer, *Men and Politics*, 391-92. [Back](#).

**Note 27:** Antonov-Ovseenko to NKID, 11 Oct., 1936; RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 832, ll. 196-200; cited in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 120-23. [Back](#).

**Note 28:** V.A. Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniia," 102-3. [Back](#).

**Note 29:** Ibid., 103-4. [Back](#).

**Note 30:** A. S. Gruzkov, "Na voennyykh zavodakh," in *Leningradtsy v Ispanii* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1989), 213-14. [Back](#).

**Note 31:** Secret Archive (8), Antonov-Ovseenko to NKID, [illeg] Nov. 1936. Quoted in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 137. [Back](#).

**Note 32:** V. V. Vechnye, "Organizatsiia i rabota tyla po optyu voiny v Ispanii (1936-1939)," *Voennaia mysli* 7 (1940): 101. [Back](#).

**Note 33:** CC PCE. Tesis y manuscritos, 19/9, no. 17, 166. For original see RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 961, ll. 131-175. [Back](#).

**Note 34:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 961, l. 158. [Back](#).

**Note 35:** Ivan Maiskii, et al., eds., *Pod znamenem Ispanskoi respubliki: Vospominaniia sovetskikh dobrovol'tsev-uchastnikov natsional'no-revolutsionnoi voiny v Ispanii, 1936-1939* (Moscow: Izdat. Nauka, 1965), 473. [Back](#).

**Note 36:** Lennart Andersson, *Soviet Aircraft and Aviation, 1917-1941* (London: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 94. [Back](#).

**Note 37:** Krivoshein to Voroshilov (undated, though probably early 1937). RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1010, l. 295. Reproduced in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 242. [Back.](#)

**Note 38:** Report of Marty forwarded to Voroshilov from Dimitrov, 23 Mar. 1937. RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 991, ll. 81-96. Reproduced in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 266. [Back.](#)

**Note 39:** Report of Gorev, 23 Mar. 1937. Secret Archive (15). Reproduced in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 458. [Back.](#)

**Note 40:** Gaikis to Litvinov, (illeg.) Apr. 1937. RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1032, ll. 203-211. Reproduced in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 274. In the report, Gaikis asserted that the only impediments to a Republican victory were the lack of military leadership and the absence of a domestic military industry. [Back.](#)

**Note 41:** Meretskov to Voroshilov, 21 Aug. 1937. RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1033, ll. 95-101. Reproduced in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 414. [Back.](#)

**Note 42:** Pascua to Negrín, 17 Feb. 1938. AHN-Madrid. Diversos. M. Pascua, Leg. 2, Exp. 2, 47. [Back.](#)

**Note 43:** Pascua's personal notes of Kremlin meeting of 26 Feb. 1938. AHN-Madrid. Diversos. M. Pascua, Leg. 2, Exp. 6. [Back.](#)

**Note 44:** Gerö to EKKI, 25 Nov. 1938. RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1081, ll. 30-34. Reproduced in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 823. [Back.](#)

**Note 45:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 853, l. 323. The report is dated 14 Dec. 1936. [Back.](#)

**Note 46:** There is wide agreement on the problems that beset the Republican navy at the start of the war. See Gerald Howson, *Arms for Spain: The Untold Story of the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Murray, 1998), 30, and Louis Fischer, *Men and Politics*, 353-54. The most detailed and well-documented treatment may be found in Michael Alpert, *La guerra civil española en el mar* (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1987), 56-130. A somewhat hyperbolic (though not inaccurate) version is given in the otherwise uneven, often tendentious Ibárruri, et al., *Guerra y Revolución en España*, vol. I, 132-36. [Back.](#)

**Note 47:** Alpert, *La Guerra civil en el mar*, 57-58. It should be noted that the Republic also had six destroyers in various stages of construction and a seventh out of commission for repairs. Thus the Republic possessed a potential fleet of sixteen destroyers, or a total of twenty-seven warships. This is also the number given in Howson, *Arms for Spain*, 30. The Soviets had fairly accurate information on the state of the Republic's navy. See Kuznetsov's numbers to compare, in *Na dalekom meridiane*, 3rd ed. (Moscow: Nauka, 1988), 65. [Back.](#)

**Note 48:** Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Voenno-Morskogo Flota (RGAVMF), f. 1529, op. 1, del. 120, l. 140. [Back.](#)

**Note 49:** Kuznetsov has left several accounts of his Spanish service, including *Na dalekom meridiane; Nakanune* (Moscow: Voennoe izdat., 1969); *Memoirs of Wartime Minister of the Navy* (Moscow: Progreso, 1990); and "Con los marinos españoles en su guerra nacional-revolucionaria," in *Bajo la bandera de la España republicana* (Moscow: Progreso, 1967). On his appointment to and arrival in Spain, see *Na dalekom meridiane*, 14-16, and "Con los marinos," 131-35. For Louis Fischer's interesting assessment of Kuznetsov, see *Men and Politics*, 392-93. [Back.](#)

**Note 50:** CC PCE. Tesis y manuscritos. 19/9, no. 2. 17. [Back.](#)

**Note 51:** Unsigned report to Defense Commissariat, 1 Jan. 1937. RGAVMF, f. 1529, op. 1, del. 120, l. 141. [Back.](#)

**Note 52:** Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniia," 157. [Back.](#)

**Note 53:** See Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 69. [Back.](#)

**Note 54:** RGAVMF, f. 1529, op. 1, del. 120, l. 136. [Back.](#)

**Note 55:** Gurevich was especially impressed with one recruit, of whom he wrote: "He

succeeds at everything that is demonstrated or demanded; he does it himself, not being afraid of getting dirty, and without difficulty he studies the explanations patiently.... No, he does not resemble our Spanish officers." Gosudarstvennyi Muzei Revolutsii (GMR), f. 6 (A. M. Gurevich), del. 2, l. 36. [Back.](#)

**Note 56:** RGVA, f. 35082, op. 1, del. 53, l. 2. [Back.](#)

**Note 57:** S. A. Vaipshasov, *Na trevozhnykh perekrestkakh: Zapiski chekista* (Moscow: Nauka, 1988), 166. Cited in Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniia," 137. [Back.](#)

**Note 58:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 991, l. 113. Unless they were passenger trains - and no such rail disaster occurred during the civil war - Berzin's claim that 500 people were killed seems doubtful, and was probably an exaggeration intended to impress his superiors. [Back.](#)

**Note 59:** The issue of guerrilla tactics in the Spanish war is well covered in Michael Alpert, "Soldiers, politics and war," in *Revolution and War in Spain, 1931-1939*, ed. Paul Preston (London: Methuen, 1984), 202-24; and in Alpert's longer study, *El ejército republicana en la guerra civil* (Barcelona: Ibérica, 1977), 291-96. [Back.](#)

**Note 60:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1032, ll. 264-271. [Back.](#)

**Note 61:** Pascua to Negrín, 8 Dec. 1937. AHN-Madrid. Diversos. M. Pascua, Leg. 2, Exp. 2-26B. The note of warning reads as follows: "This telegram transmits the petition of the Commissariat for Foreign Trade to receive visas for twenty-five Soviet passports, with requested rights of entry until 6 Jan. 1938. Be advised of my suspicion that some of these are members of the internal police. Details and names will follow in the pouch. Pascua." [Back.](#)

**Note 62:** Fischer, *Men and Politics*, 361. [Back.](#)

**Note 63:** See Orlov, "Answers to the Questionnaire of Prof. S. G. Payne" (unpublished, 1968); and Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate, *The Legacy of Alexander Orlov* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973). [Back.](#)

**Note 64:** For Orlov's claims about the extent of counterintelligence in Spain, see "Answers to the Questionnaire of Prof. S. G. Payne," 4-8. [Back.](#)

**Note 65:** It is worth noting that among the eighty-one declassified documents edited by Habeck and Radosh in their recently published volume on Stalin's intervention in Spain (*Spain Betrayed*)—documents carefully selected to present an uncharitable view of Soviet participation in the war—not one discusses the activities of Orlov. [Back.](#)

**Note 66:** Michael Alpert, "Soldiers, politics and war," 220. Alpert has conducted exhaustive research in the Servicio Histórico Militar, sección sobre la guerra civil (Archivo de la Guerra de Liberación). [Back.](#)

**Note 67:** See *Gaceta de Madrid*, 17 October 1936. Cited in Alpert, "Soldiers, politics and war," 224. [Back.](#)

**Note 68:** Cited in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 66. [Back.](#)

**Note 69:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 991, l. 193. [Back.](#)

**Note 70:** Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniia," 149. [Back.](#)

**Note 71:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1082, ll. 204-205. [Back.](#)

**Note 72:** RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, del. 327, l. 74. Apart from the propaganda materials shipped to assist Soviet political workers in the Republic, Moscow also dispatched large quantities of Russian-language materials for cultural/propaganda projects within the Friends organizations (detailed above in Chapter Four). Many of the Russian-language propaganda materials shipped to Spain—materials which included contemporary Soviet literature; collections of the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin; newspapers; and popular, literary, and scientific journals—were confiscated by Francoist forces at the end of the civil war. For nearly six decades, most of these books and periodicals sat uncatalogued in burlap sacks in the basement of the Salamanca Archivo Histórico Nacional - Sección Guerra Civil. I

was permitted to view this fascinating cache in 1996, in exchange for assistance in cataloguing the collection. The Salamanca collection contains nearly 400 different titles. [Back.](#)

**Note 73:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1143, l. 127. Cited in Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniiia," 150. [Back.](#)

**Note 74:** Report to Voroshilov, 22 Oct. 1937. RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1033, ll. 174-183. Reproduced in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 483. The author is not named. [Back.](#)

**Note 75:** See Chapter Seven. [Back.](#)

**Note 76:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1015, ll. 92-113. Reproduced in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 233. [Back.](#)

**Note 77:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1143, l. 127. [Back.](#)

**Note 78:** This unit was called the "Otdelnaia Radiodiviziia Narkomata Oborony." [Back.](#)

**Note 79:** Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniiia," 130. [Back.](#)

**Note 80:** See Tables V-1 and V-2 in Chapter Twelve above. [Back.](#)

**Note 81:** Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniiia," 130. [Back.](#)

**Note 82:** The problem is discussed above in Chapter Three. [Back.](#)

**Note 83:** I. N. Artemev, "Sovetskie radisty v voine v Ispanii," *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* 7 (1976): 60. [Back.](#)

**Note 84:** Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniiia," 131. [Back.](#)

**Note 85:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1010, l. 199. [Back.](#)

**Note 86:** The language problem among the advisors is discussed in Chapter Sixteen. [Back.](#)

**Note 87:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1143, l. 127. [Back.](#)

**Note 88:** VOKS to Rafael Martínez Alonso, 21 June 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 31. [Back.](#)

**Note 89:** VOKS to Juan Vicens, 20 Mar. 1935. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 828, l. 5. [Back.](#)

**Note 90:** Tolmachaev, "Sovetskii Soiuz i Ispaniiia," 154. [Back.](#)

**Note 91:** Adelina and Paulina Abramson, *Mosaico Roto* (Madrid: Compañía Literaria, 1995). [Back.](#)

**Note 92:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 832, l. 316. [Back.](#)

**Note 93:** See Kuznetsov, "Con los marinos," 133-4. [Back.](#)

**Note 94:** Kuznetsov, "Con los marinos," 139. [Back.](#)

**Note 95:** See Krivoshein, "Los tanquistas voluntarios en los combates por Madrid," in *Bajo la bandera de la España republicana* (Moscow: Progreso, 1967), 323-25. [Back.](#)

**Note 96:** CC PCE. Tesis y manuscritos, 19/10, no. 17, 178-179. [Back.](#)

**Note 97:** Intelligence report to Voroshilov, 22 Oct. 1937. RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1033, ll. 174-183. Reproduced in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 483. [Back.](#)

**Note 98:** RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 961, ll. 207-220. Reproduced in Habeck and Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 288. [Back.](#)

**Note 99:** Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Muzeia Revolutsii (GAMR), f. 6 (R. A. Zernova), del. 2, l.

21. [Back.](#)

**Note 100:** See M. Yakushin, "En la primera batalla contra el fascismo," in *Bajo la bandera de la España republicana* (Moscow: Progreso, 1967), 345. [Back.](#)

**Note 101:** See for example, Ibárruri, et al., *Guerra y Revolución en España*, vol. III, 261. [Back.](#)

**Note 102:** CC PCE. Tesis y manuscritos, 19/10, no. 17, 179. The original report is at RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 961, ll. 174-175. [Back.](#)

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