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Conclusion

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Though the Kremlin neither anticipated nor precipitated the civil war, Stalin immediately recognized events occurring on the Iberian Peninsula as an occasion for mobilization on various levels. Within weeks of the rebel uprising, Stalin had begun to exploit the war in Spain to shore up flagging support for his own regime. While taking no action to give the Republic any material support, the Kremlin sought to link the Loyalist cause to the security of the USSR in the minds of Soviet citizens. Through a series of Politburo decrees, a campaign of elaborate orchestration among agents working in Soviet cities, and relentless manipulation of the state press, by early August 1936 the Spanish war had been converted into a cause of enormous ideological and emotional importance to the workers of the USSR. It is noteworthy in this regard that Moscow's first representatives in Spain—Kol'tsov, Karmen, Makaseev, and Ehrenburg—were not military advisors or secret police, but journalists and filmmakers, whose sensational images and accounts of the civil war were employed in a wide-scale propaganda campaign directed at the Soviet populace. Despite this tremendous concentration of resources, the domestic campaign was only partially successful; the surviving archival and cinematic record indicates that the allegedly spontaneous nature of the solidarity movement was revealed even at the time as a transparent construct, eliciting more than a little derision and indifference, though also some genuine signs of popular enthusiasm.

Simultaneously, the Soviet domestic campaign of support for the Republic was duplicated in identical form under the Comintern's direction among the national Communist parties. Drawing an unambiguous connection between the Spanish rebels and international fascism, the Comintern strategy was to present events in Spain as a direct threat to international Communism. To this end, Comintern representatives staged rallies in numerous European and North American cities, sought worker donations for humanitarian relief, and, by mid-August, had begun to assemble an army of international volunteers to fight on the side of the Republic.

Although the Soviet regime had moved quickly to capitalize on the war's potential via a domestic and worldwide solidarity campaign, the Kremlin was not immediately eager to become directly involved in the Spanish imbroglio. Moscow waited nearly ten weeks before supplying the first arms to the Loyalist side. Before committing himself militarily, Stalin took precautions to ensure that the entire aid operation would be carried out in strict secrecy. In addition, as if to prepare for the inevitable public disclosure of the assistance plan, throughout the month of September the Soviet representative to the Non-Intervention Committee made a series of statements that left open the possibility of Soviet military aid to the Loyalists. In the Republic itself, Stalin took pains to ensure that he had an elaborate organizational structure in place to monitor all support activities. To this end, diplomatic personnel and military advisors were dispatched to Spain in advance of the actual weaponry. At the same time, the question of financing was resolved through the Republic's commitment to send Moscow the better part of its gold stocks. In sum, Stalin took no action until he was assured that Soviet involvement in Spain would not have adverse economic or diplomatic effects on the USSR.

Once involved in the conflict, and for approximately the first ten months of its military intervention, the Soviet regime spared little effort in attempting to turn the tide of the war and help the Republic win. Significant quantities of high quality hardware were sent to Spain, and talented advisors, tankers, pilots, and a large support staff were marshaled in support of the Republican war effort. Soviet military training centers in the USSR were made available to young Republican pilots, and experienced Russian instructors were soon

occupied with turning out Loyalist flyers. The newest generation Soviet planes and tanks were dispatched to Spain, with updated versions—most notably the I-16 fighter and BT-5 fast tank—being sent as soon as possible. Between October 1936 and the autumn of 1937, the Soviets hoped to win in Spain, and no evidence suggests that Stalin intended to sabotage the Republican war effort or cause the conflict to drag on in a war of attrition

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In addition to working towards a Republican victory, Moscow also pursued the longer-term goal of establishing a genuine ally in the west Mediterranean in a victorious Spanish Republic. Had the Kremlin viewed the Republic as a mere source of hard currency, as some have argued, or as a tool of strategic maneuvering between the West and Germany, as others have often claimed, the regime would not likely have sought to intertwine itself with the Republic on myriad levels. In the event, however, Moscow was soon treating the Republic like its most privileged ally, and sought to develop connections with the Loyalist government that went far beyond the supply of arms and advisors.

Consider, for a moment, the Kremlin's reception of the Spanish ambassador Pascua. Though Spain and Russia had not had high-level diplomatic ties since before the Russian Revolution, Pascua was afforded unprecedented access to the Soviet leadership and was treated like a celebrity in Moscow. Meanwhile, the Kremlin undertook a major propaganda campaign to develop cultural relations between the two countries. This included the screening in the Republican zone of dozens of Soviet films as well as the dispatch from the USSR of poster art, phonographic records, and many thousands of volumes of Soviet literature. In the Soviet Union itself, thanks to the active direction of state authorities, all things Spanish were soon the rage. A Spanish exhibit was hastily added to the venerated Museum of the Revolution, which was a required stop for schoolchildren paying homage to the secular religion of Marxism-Leninism. Literary and theatrical events on Spanish themes dominated cultural circles throughout the major cities of the USSR.

The Soviet government's commitment to a Republican victory until autumn 1937 was in no way a selfless or purely magnanimous position. Through the winter of 1936-37 and the following spring, even as Moscow expedited new Republican orders for tanks and planes, the Defense Commissariat clandestinely overcharged the Loyalist regime for nearly every piece of hardware shipped. The brazen manipulation of monetary conversions allowed the Kremlin to bilk the Republic out of some \$51 million. Despite Moscow's willingness to grant the Republic a large line of credit in 1938, and the shipment of arms in December of that year, it is impossible not to conclude that, whatever aid it rendered to the Republic, the Soviet regime fared quite well on the financial ledger. If they did not indeed make money on the Spanish war, the Soviet regime came quite close to breaking even—not a bad arrangement, given that Moscow was able to test weaponry in battle conditions and survey up close the arsenal of Nazi Germany

By the second half of 1937, a major shift in Soviet policy towards the Republic was discernable. Every major indicator of Moscow's investment in a Republican victory was now in decline: arms supplies were dramatically scaled back, the diplomatic missions were downgraded and withdrawn, and Soviet flyers and tankers began to be replaced by Republican crews. The earlier agit-prop onslaught also slowed, and in some areas ceased. On the domestic front, the Soviet regime began to disengage the populace from Spanish affairs. The war disappeared into the middle pages of the state newspapers, and in public speeches Soviet leaders mentioned the Republic's cause less and less. In Russian cinemas, newsreels devoted to the Chinese Communists began trumping coverage of the war in Spain. Even the Republic's representatives in Moscow lost their privileged treatment. For the last twenty months of the Spanish Civil War, while the Kremlin may not have altogether given up hope for a Republican victory, the Soviet leadership was noticeably less optimistic.

Stalin has frequently been criticized for abandoning the Republic midway through the war,

but the evidence presented here suggests a more nuanced assessment of Soviet supply patterns over the course of the conflict. The logistics of Operation X certainly became more difficult over time, with various factors conspiring to make transshipping from the USSR expensive, risky, and on some routes practically impossible. As the struggle wore on, the Defense Commissariat became increasingly distressed that future shipments of Soviet weaponry might be intercepted and could never reach the Loyalist zone; more to the point, after the Republic's gold was exhausted in early 1938, any losses would necessarily be incurred directly by the Soviets. But a second development was equally significant in determining supply volume. Even barring the issue of successful delivery, the Soviet technological advantage in the war was conclusively lost by late in the spring of 1937. By that time, the most advanced Russian tanks and planes available could no longer compete with the weaponry being supplied to the rebels. The arrival of the German-made HE-111 and ME-109 rendered the entire Red Air Force fleet of bombers, fighters, and reconnaissance aircraft essentially obsolete. And while the Nationalists were never able to match the Russians in armor, the dispatch of large numbers of witheringly effective German anti-tank guns rendered the issue moot. In sum, after August 1937, even had a safe and efficient transit route from Russia been opened up, no matériel then being produced by the Soviet defense industry could have undermined the rebels' widening position of technological domination. In this light, it is hardly surprising that Moscow scaled back its aid in mid-1937, though, curiously enough, Stalin did not withdraw completely, but instead remained engaged with the Republic until quite close to its demise

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Collaboration between Soviet advisors and the Republican command was often hampered by Moscow's pursuit of an ideological agenda in Spain that had little to do with military victory. At times, the Soviet regime's relentless persecution of non-conformist Communist elements in Spain or its desire to manipulate and control Republican politics completely sidetracked strategic objectives. On several occasions—most notably during the unrest in Barcelona in May 1937—Moscow's preoccupation with confronting the independent POUM militias or uncooperative anarcho-syndicalists left the impression of a struggle waged not on Franco's army, but on supposedly rogue Loyalist elements. The Soviets also damaged relations between the two countries with their brazen Communist indoctrination of the young Spanish war refugees evacuated to the USSR, although here too the audacious dictates of the leadership were never fully realized in the schools themselves

The frequent incompetence, negligence, or criminal behavior of some Soviet military personnel posted in Spain further undermined Moscow's success in achieving its military goals. Declassified documents from the Soviet military archive reveal that the Defense Commissariat had only limited control over its men in Spain, and acts of insubordination and excess abounded. Not a few Red Army men acted like petty tyrants in their respective zones of authority; others engaged in drunkenness and sexual violence. Overall, the quality of men Moscow sent to Spain was uneven, some doing more damage than good, and others nothing at all

Greater damage was no doubt caused by the Kremlin's own dealings with the Soviet ground personnel in the Republic, where an atmosphere of mistrust permeated all relations between the center and the field. Red Army policy in Spain established early on a series of highly irregular practices in the deployment and treatment of military advisors and specialists. Permitting only brief tours for most of its men in Spain, the Kremlin often pulled advisors from their posts at the most inopportune moments, plunging battle plans into disarray and depriving the Soviet contingent of the individuals who had the keenest understanding of the situation on the ground. Many of those removed were never replaced, creating a chronic shortage of advisors, a weakness commented on in countless confidential reports to Voroshilov. Further injury was inflicted by the routine transmission from Moscow of threats to members of the advisory apparatus. Throughout the conflict, the efficiency of the advisors was constantly eroded by the fear of removal or reprisals.

In areas indirectly related to the military effort, the Kremlin could at times display a baffling level of ineptitude. No area better illustrates the Soviet regime's benightedness in confronting the inherent challenges of the Spanish enterprise than its linguistic shortcomings. During the early years of the Second Republic, VOKS's Iberian correspondents had frequently implored the Soviets to either learn Spanish or teach them Russian. Similar entreaties were made by the Comintern leadership, which demanded in the spring of 1936 that all agit-prop materials sent to Spain be translated into Spanish. Nevertheless, and improbably, Moscow never elevated Castilian to a language of primary importance in its broad international agit-prop strategy, an oversight that created enormous problems for the Soviets during the Spanish conflict. When VOKS began working closely with the Soviet diplomatic missions and local friendship organizations in the Republic in the autumn of 1936, the agency found itself wholly unprepared and was forced to send nearly all agit-prop materials in Russian, English, French, or German. Needless to say, these did nothing to promote Soviet interests in Spain. More damning still, the testimonies of countless Soviet participants confirm that a severe shortage of qualified translators and interpreters seriously weakened the advisors' abilities to carry out their duties in the field.

Where the Soviets did not succeed in handicapping themselves, they often encountered an uncooperative and recalcitrant Republican government. Republican politicians bristled at the hubris and audacity of the official Soviet diplomatic representatives, while Loyalist officers were routinely offended by the cavalier attitude of the advisors. Worse, the Republic responded to Pascua's enthusiastic welcome by Moscow authorities first with callous indifference, then flagrant neglect. The Republican mission to Russia, where the Loyalist government had its best opportunity to strengthen and deepen ties with the Kremlin had they so chosen, was treated like a distant and irrelevant outpost. For the first year of the embassy's existence, the Foreign Ministry refused to send proper financial support or inform the ambassador of developments relevant to the mission. By early 1938, the Republic's initial slight had become a mocking affront; the ambassador was withdrawn, never to be replaced. By summer of that year, the embassy had more canine residents than Spanish nationals

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The price of the Republic's abandonment of its Moscow embassy went far beyond soured relations with the Soviet government. In two specific areas, the short-staffed and downgraded embassy caused direct harm to the Republican war effort. In the first instance, one need only look to the desperate December 1938 mission of Hidalgo de Cisneros to procure additional arms for the Loyalist government. Had the embassy been functioning normally up to this date, the matter could have been addressed earlier, through the same amicable relationship that the Soviet regime had taken care to nurture with Pascua's original mission. Secondly, considering the Soviet practice of overcharging the Republic for arms, it can safely be assumed that a fully staffed embassy would have assigned one or more individuals the task of verifying all transactions pertaining to the sale of weaponry. Yet the pathetic narrative of the Republican embassy in Moscow demonstrates beyond any doubt that neither Pascua nor his successors were ever able to cope with more than a fraction of the responsibilities foisted on them. Given the state of the embassy, it is now understandable how the Soviets finessed their on-going deceit

Taken together, the embittered relations between Soviet personnel and Spaniards in the Republican zone, Moscow's linguistic deficiencies, and the Republican government's minimal support of its embassy are all symptoms of a more general problem in the affairs between the Soviet Union and Loyalist Spain. On a fundamental level, there existed a constant friction that no amount of rhetoric about the fraternity of the two peoples could overcome. Ultimately, the two states possessed too little mutual cultural understanding, diplomatic precedence, and linguistic expertise to bridge the geographic and historic gap between them. The Soviets, despite having had a presence in Spain since the early 1930s, grasped very little about the Republic, while the Republican leadership seemed to have only limited curiosity about the Soviet Union. Each state had needs that apparently could only be filled

by the other country, but neither possessed the understanding of how to best obtain the services without alienating or offending the other power. In many areas, and throughout the war, when presented with a choice of options, one of which would poison relations, and one of which would help not only bilateral cooperation but also the larger war effort, both the Soviets and the Republicans often made the wrong choice. Moscow's policy towards Spain was rarely altruistic, almost always self-aggrandizing, and sometimes counterproductive. Many Spanish Republicans, meanwhile, were suspicious of Moscow's presence from the start, and accepted Stalin's help only to stave off immediate annihilation.

And thus we return to Stalin, the oft-maligned villain of the Spanish Civil War, the perennial scapegoat of Loyalist defeat, whose eventual intervention on the side of the Republic first justified and later fully excused the rebel uprising. Was Stalin the malicious meddler, saboteur, opportunist, and murderer that detractors from both Spanish camps have long maintained? The evidence presented in this study allows for an emphatic if qualified refutation of the long-held demonization of Stalin's role in the Spain. In every facet of Soviet involvement in Spanish affairs during the civil war, Stalin's position was never one of strength, but rather one of weakness, incompetence, inexperience, and indecisiveness. In the Spanish theater, the Soviets possessed none of the requisite characteristics of a strong and imposing foreign power; the Kremlin's physical distance from Spain was so great as to render the problem of extended supply, surveillance, and control all but impossible. The Soviet leadership could barely keep track of their own representatives on the ground, much less infiltrate and control the myriad institutions of Republican Spain. In terms of their sheer numbers, the Soviet presence barely rose to the level of a token force. Just over two thousand Soviet personnel served over the course of the long war—hardly a domineering contribution in a struggle that saw the mobilization of over a million men under arms—and two-thirds of these were engaged as relatively low-level pilots, tankers, technicians, and other support staff. In some key battles and on entire fronts, the Soviet presence was almost nil. If the Russians' military support to the Republic was insufficient and weak, the accompanying agit-prop campaign in this so-called *zona roja* was marked by a level of incompetence unbecoming of even the most lackluster foreign colonizer. Apart from the successful dissemination a number of Soviet feature films, the impact of the cultural offensive was quite minor; even the obvious parallels between the Spanish struggle and the Russian Civil War were poorly exploited

Even in Russian secondary sources that celebrate Soviet prowess and altruism in quintessentially hyperbolic, sometimes Orwellian language, the general military and socio-cultural fiasco that was the Kremlin's contribution to the Republic's war effort cannot be concealed. Take, for example, the short memoir account of M. Iakushin, "En la primera batalla contra el fascismo," in *Bajo la bandera de la España republicana*. Iakushin supplies the reader with predictable paeans to Soviet and Loyalist heroism, self-sacrifice, and spontaneous camaraderie, and unleashes frequent attacks on the odious nature of the Nationalists' fascist collaborators, as well as the unforgivable abandonment of the Republic by the West. Yet, these standard Soviet rhetorical flourishes aside, the bulk of Iakushin's memoirs in no way constitutes a charitable assessment of Soviet performance: he refers repeatedly to the perennial shortage of aircraft, spare parts, and fuel; he makes light of the total absence of Russian-Spanish interpreters assigned to his unit, while unwittingly exposing the resultant chaos; and moreover, his general treatment of the Soviet pilots' preparation conveys the impression that most training was done in the field and was improvised, ad hoc, and slapdash, with predictably mediocre results

Internal declassified reports, sent directly to the Defense Commissariat, were more withering and blunt in their assessment of Soviet efficiency in the field, though without the propagandistic overkill with which the public record was always laced. Most after-action summaries were blistering encyclopedias of neglect and incompetence, criticizing the constant shortages of tanks, planes, and replacement parts, the poor state of cooperation between Russian and Loyalist officers, the distressingly short tours by members of the

Soviet advisory apparatus, the wholesale lack of training among much of the Soviet delegation, the inability of most advisors to communicate without interpreters, the catastrophic failure of even basic and small-scale operations, the poisoning of bilateral relations resulting from Russian bad manners, to list only the most frequently cited topics

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In the final analysis, it appears that Stalin's ignominious record in relation to the Spanish Civil War has been exaggerated by all parties involved. The claim that Stalin manipulated the Republic and controlled its destiny from afar rests solely on decrees and intentions, and not on the Soviet dictator's demonstrable abilities to realize either his short- or long-term goals on the Iberian Peninsula. Through all of the Kremlin's involvement in the civil war, there runs a consistent disconnection between Soviet ambitions in Spain and what the regime was able to accomplish. Stalin's Spanish adventure was at heart always self-serving and cynical, and it included genuinely insidious components, but its intended scope extended far beyond the Kremlin's actual powers and, just as its implementation remained strikingly ineffectual, its consequences were unintentionally benign

[Stalin and the Spanish Civil War](#)