
Stalin, Spain and the Making of a Warlord

The Sources of Soviet Intervention in the Spanish Civil War

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Abstract

Stalin was central to the Soviet intervention in the Spanish civil war: no foreign cause was closer to his heart or more strategically important. The Soviets' covert programme of military aid to Republican Spain began at his behest. Hundreds of documents in Russian archives detail Moscow's political advice and practical aid to Republican Spain and provide abundant evidence of Stalin's sustained attention to the progress of the civil war. All the threads of the Soviet war effort in relation to Spain – military, economic, political, social and cultural – were held together by Stalin. It was Stalin who decided what arms were sent to Spain, in what quantities and at what price. All decisions of any significance in relation to Spain – and a good many not-so-important ones – were taken by Stalin or by his Politburo. Together with the Russian Civil War, the Spanish conflict shaped Stalin's early formation as a warlord.

Key words: Stalin, Spanish civil war, Soviet and Comintern intervention in Spain

No foreign state was more involved in the Spanish Civil War than the Soviet Union. From the outset of the conflict, Moscow was the main international champion of the Republican cause, supplying massive amounts of food, medical supplies and armaments. Without Soviet backing, it is doubtful the Republican regime would have survived for as long as it did.¹

Between 1936 and 1939 the USSR sent 600,000 tons of war material to Spain, including 60 armoured cars, 340 mortars, 347 tanks, 648 aircraft, 1186 artillery pieces, 20,486 machine guns, 110,000 aerial bombs,

497,813 rifles, 3.4 million shells, and 862 million bullets. Most of these items arrived in 1936-1937 but there were also substantial supplies in 1938 and even a trickle of aid in early 1939.² Dozens of Soviet ships carrying these supplies through thousands of miles of often dangerous waters were attacked, sunk or captured. Soviet goods did not come free of charge. When the Republic's gold bullion was transferred to the safety of the USSR at the end of 1936, these reserves were used to pay for Soviet war material. Some of the gold was also sold on international markets and transferred to foreign currency accounts that enabled the Republican government to purchase supplies from other countries. Towards the end of the civil war the Soviets provided further loans and credits to the embattled Republicans.³

Some 2000 Soviet military personnel served in Spain, as pilots and tank commanders, as well as military advisors and instructors, more than 150 of whom died fighting for the Republic.⁴ On the diplomatic front the Soviets struggled valiantly for policies and agreements that would curtail Italian and German aid to General Francisco Franco's mutineers, while the international communist movement waged a huge campaign of solidarity and organised some 40,000 foreign volunteers to serve in International Brigades that took part in some of the civil war's fiercest battles. Millions of Soviet citizens donated hard-earned roubles to aid Republican Spain and thousands of Spanish children were evacuated from the war zone to the USSR. When the war ended, many thousands of former Republican fighters also found refuge in the Soviet Union.⁵

Along with Soviet arms, medical supplies and military personnel went the politics of Stalin's 'Great Terror'. Stalin was convinced there was an international capitalist conspiracy to subvert and sabotage the Soviet socialist system. Allied to this conspiracy was his arch-rival, Leon Trotsky, who had been exiled from the USSR in 1929. Stalin believed Trotsky and his supporters were traitors to the revolutionary cause who were in cahoots with Nazis and Fascists.

The outbreak of the Spanish civil war coincided with the first of the infamous Moscow show trials of former Bolshevik leaders, in this instance the prosecution of Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev – Stalin's erstwhile allies against Trotsky during the post-Lenin succession power struggles of the early 1920s. Falsely accused of orchestrating a network that killed the Leningrad party secretary Sergey Kirov in December 1934 and then conspired to assassinate Stalin and other Soviet leaders. Kamenev and Zinoviev were deemed guilty and sentenced to death, as were Trotsky and his son, Lev Sedov, *in absentia*.

‘It was clearly proved that Trotsky, Zinoviev and their gang stood on the other side of the barricades, in the same camp as those who are fighting against the Spanish people’, wrote Georgi Dimitrov, the leader of the Communist International. ‘The trial of the terrorists, agents of fascism, is an integral part of the anti-fascist struggle of the international working class. True solidarity with the Spanish people is not compatible with the protection of the agents of fascism ... Whoever supports counter-revolutionary terrorists in the USSR, directly or indirectly, is, at bottom, serving the ends of Spanish fascism’.⁶

In November 1937, Stalin told Dimitrov: ‘Trotskyists must be hunted down, shot, destroyed. These are international provocateurs, fascism’s most vicious agents’.⁷

The political-ideological transmission belt between Spain and the Soviet Union was two-way. Events in Spain fed the hysteria that drove the Great Terror and encouraged Stalin to purge his own military of so-called ‘fifth columnists’ – a terminology that derived from the Spanish Civil War and soon became widespread in Soviet political discourse. In February 1937, Defence Commissar Kliment Voroshilov cabled Soviet representatives in Valencia and Madrid that recent Republican military failures had been the result of high-level treachery. A few days later he urged the removal of politically unreliable elements from the Republic’s General Staff. Speaking at the Soviet party’s central committee plenum in March 1937, Stalin said that ‘winning a battle in time of war takes several corps of Red Army soldiers. But reversing that victory at the front requires just a few spies somewhere in army headquarters’. When Stalin purged his own military high command in June 1937, he claimed ‘they wanted to turn the USSR into another Spain’.⁸

Stalin himself was at the heart of the Soviet intervention in Spain: no foreign cause was deemed more strategically important or closer to his heart. Indeed, the Soviets’ covert programme of military aid to Republican Spain began at his behest. Far from restraining Soviet support for Republican Spain for diplomatic reasons, as some historians have claimed, he was ready to break up the Non-Intervention Committee established by Britain and France to constrain the internationalisation of the civil war. Hundreds of documents in Russian archives detail Moscow’s political advice and practical aid to Republican Spain and provide abundant evidence of Stalin’s sustained attention to the progress of the civil war. In 1936-1937 he dealt with documentation and took decisions about Soviet aid to Spain on an almost daily basis.⁹ It is often said that when it became clear the Republic was going to lose the civil war, Stalin lost interest in

Spanish affairs and began to cut back on aid to Spain. But there is no Soviet archival evidence to support such a supposition. Soviet aid to Spain ebbed and flowed with the course of the war, in response to the demands of the Republican Government, the limitations of domestic defence production capabilities, and the logistical difficulties posed by the long sea routes. The worst that could be said of Stalin in this regard is that towards the end of the civil war he was wary of sending aid that could be lost or captured by the enemy and might not do much good even if it did get into the right hands. Besides, he had another ally he now needed to supply – China, which was invaded by Japan in July 1937, but that Soviet aid programme was far smaller than the one to Spain.¹⁰

War was central to Stalin's mental universe and life-experience. As a young man, he took part in the 1905 revolution in Russia and organised armed bands of radicals who robbed banks and assassinated Tsarist officials. He was an exile in Siberia when the First World War broke out but returned to Petrograd in March 1917 when Tsar Nicholas II was forced to abdicate by a soldiers' mutiny in the Russian capital. After Lenin's Bolsheviks seized power in November 1917, they withdrew Russia from the First World War and in 1918 signed the Brest-Litovsk peace treaties with Germany and its allies. When Lenin urged the Bolshevik party to save the revolution by accepting the draconian Brest peace, Stalin was his strongest supporter. During the Russian civil war of 1918–1921, he was Lenin's troubleshooter-in-chief, serving as a political commissar on many different fronts. While he did not fight or direct battles, he did serve in the war zone and take part in military decision-making. He began to form his own views on military strategy and tactics, placing particular emphasis on the importance of the military's political loyalty, on drastic action to quash 'fifth columnists', and having to hand effective fighting reserves as well as sufficient supplies.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Stalin read a lot of books about military history and strategy. He also delved into military memoirs and studied armaments manuals and intelligence reports about the armies of potential enemies. Unsurprisingly, these interests intensified after Hitler came to power in 1933 and the spectre of a new world war loomed ever larger.¹¹ But the most important catalyst for Stalin's increasing attention to military affairs was Spain's civil war. Spain was not the only military conflict that engaged Stalin's attention – there were Soviet border clashes with Imperial Japan throughout the 1930s – but it was that country's civil war which served as a dress rehearsal for his later role as Soviet Supreme Commander. As during the Great Patriotic War, all the threads of the

Soviet war effort in relation to Spain – military, economic, political, social and cultural – were held together by Stalin. While Stalin did not direct military operations in Spain, he was not hesitant about expressing his views on strategic matters when the opportunity arose. The Russian Civil War and the Spanish Civil War were the two experiences that shaped Stalin's early formation as a warlord.

Stalin's most consequential action in relation to Spanish affairs was his decision to intervene in the civil war through the provision of military aid and advisors.

The first reports about the military revolt in Spain began to appear in the Soviet press on 20 July 1936. While these reports were confused and contradictory, the overall impression was of a Republican government embattled, but not fatally threatened.¹² On 21 July, Dmitry Manuisky, the Soviet party's representative on Communist International's Executive Committee, reported to Stalin that Spanish communist leader, José Díaz, had messaged that the mutiny had been largely defeated by workers' militia. On 23 July Dimitrov sent Stalin the Comintern's directive to the Spanish party ordering it to prioritise the definitive defeat of the military rebellion and to unite all those committed to a 'genuine democratic republic'. On this document Stalin wrote 'correct'. Two days later, Dimitrov forwarded to Stalin Díaz's message that the Republican government was winning the battle with the mutineers. Such optimistic reports continued to flow into Stalin's office for the next several days.¹³ A more sober view was provided by a detailed Soviet Military Intelligence briefing on the situation in Spain dated 7 August:

The fate of the People's Front in Spain depends to a significant degree on the foreign factor. On the basis of the internal balance of forces the People's Front has every chance of victory. However, German and Italian fascist aid to the mutiny means its situation is significantly worse. The absence of essential support for Madrid could have serious consequences for the outcome of the struggle.¹⁴

Diplomatic relations between the USSR and Spain were established in 1933 but the two countries had yet to exchange ambassadors. Hence the first Spanish request for Soviet munitions – dated 25 July – was sent via the Soviet embassy in Paris.¹⁵ By early August, however, this request had been overtaken by a British and French proposal for a non-intervention agreement that would preclude foreign military assistance to the warring sides in Spain.

On 5 August the French approached the Soviets and asked them to sign a non-intervention declaration. Maxim Litvinov, the Soviet People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs was on holiday, so the matter was handled by his deputy, Nikolai Krestinsky, who advised Stalin to agree to the French proposal with the proviso that other states immediately stopped aiding the mutineers. Stalin simplified Krestinsky's draft response to the French and inserted that Soviet adherence to non-intervention was specifically conditional on Portugal's participation in the scheme. The Stalin-amended text was notified to the French and then published in the Soviet press on 6 August.¹⁶

On 7 August Krestinsky met Stalin for more than two hours in the dictator's office in the Kremlin. Trade relations with Germany were the main subject of discussion but it seems likely that Spanish affairs also cropped up.¹⁷ On 9 August Voroshilov proposed to Stalin the dispatch to Spain of a senior military and intelligence officer – Vladimir Gorev-Vysokogorets. From elsewhere came proposals that journalists Ilya Ehrenburg and Mikhail Kol'tsov should be sent as reporters to Spain. This was duly approved by the Politburo and a couple of weeks later Gorev was appointed military attaché in Madrid, together with a newly named Soviet ambassador, Marcel Rozenberg – an experienced diplomat whose most recent posting had been to the League of Nations in Geneva. Around the same time, two Soviet filmmakers were despatched to Spain.¹⁸

On 9 August Krestinsky wrote to Stalin again, this time about a Spanish proposal for the Soviets to covertly purchase supplies for them in Great Britain. Krestinsky feared such an operation could be compromised and suggested instead that the Spaniards should be encouraged to work through companies in Mexico or other Latin American countries.¹⁹ Stalin's reaction is unrecorded, but Krestinsky's proposal may have seeded the dictator's later directive (see below) that the Soviets should sell bomber planes to Mexico for onward dispatch to Spain.

Stalin went on holiday to Sochi on the Black Sea on 14 August and remained there until 25 October. Just before he left Moscow he talked with Krestinsky and settled the matter of Soviet diplomatic representation in Spain.²⁰ As was his custom while on vacation, Stalin was in constant telephone or telegraphic contact with Politburo members in Moscow, his main interlocuter being Lazar Kaganovich, the Transport Commissar.²¹

On 17 August the Politburo approved the sale of oil to Spain and the next day Stalin wrote to Kaganovich that the Spanish should be sold the fuel immediately at a discounted price and the same should apply to grain and foodstuffs.²²

The day before Kaganovich had informed Stalin the French wanted the Soviets to withdraw their condition that all aid to the mutineers should cease before they would agree on the non-intervention declaration. Krestinsky advised that Moscow should tell Paris it was prepared to amend its position to bring it in line with the French proposal if all the other states did the same. Stalin agreed with Krestinsky, pointing out to Kaganovich that Italy, Germany and other states had made their own amendments to the French draft.²³

By this time Litvinov had returned to Moscow from vacation. Keen to maintain a diplomatic united front with Britain and France, he wrote to the Politburo on 22 August rejecting Krestinsky's formulation on grounds that agreeing on the French wording was the best way to inhibit foreign supplies to Franco's forces.²⁴ Litvinov seemingly won the day and on 23 August the USSR formally adhered to the non-intervention agreement as proposed by France and a week later officially banned the export of war material to Spain.

That was far from the end of the matter, however. On 28 August and again on 2 September Dimitrov met with members of the Soviet Politburo (Litvinov was not a member of that body). The question of aid to Spain was discussed, including the possibility of setting up what later became known as the International Brigades. Stalin was consulted by telephone.²⁵ In Spain on 4 September the socialist leader Francisco Largo Caballero came to power as head of a new government that included the Spanish communists. It was probably this development, together with accumulating reports of growing Nazi and Fascist supplies to Franco, that prompted Stalin to initiate a covert programme of Soviet military aid to Spain.

The signal was his cable to Kaganovich on 6 September:

It would be good to sell to Mexico 50 high-speed bombers, so that Mexico can immediately resell them to Spain. We could also pick about 20 of our best pilots to perform combat operations in Spain and at the same time give flight training on high-speed bombers to Spanish pilots. Think this matter over as quickly as possible. It would be good to sell by the same means 20,000 rifles, 1,000 machine guns, and about 20 million rounds of ammunition. We just need to know the calibres.²⁶

The Politburo sprang into action and in a little over a week it was in receipt of an outline plan for 'Operation X' – the secret supply of Soviet arms to Republican Spain. Further reports followed and on 29 September the Politburo formally authorised the plan.²⁷ The first supplies of Soviet

arms reached Spain in early October. It should be noted, however, that they had been preceded by five shipments of humanitarian aid.

In the meantime, Stalin had appointed Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko as Soviet Consul-General in Barcelona. Antonov-Ovseenko played a pivotal role in the Bolsheviks' forcible seizure of power in 1917. He fought in the Russian Civil War and then embarked on a diplomatic career. Commenting on the appointment in a message to Kaganovich dated 17 September, Stalin wrote: 'He knows military affairs. Besides, he will be able to sweet-talk the anarchists'.²⁸

The Comintern's military involvement in the civil war predated Stalin's decisions on intervention. On 11 August Dimitrov sent a cypher message to Earl Browder, the head of the US Communist Party, urging him to recruit pilots for Spain. On 17 August, the French communist chief, Maurice Thorez, informed Dimitrov that they were sending pilots, machine gunners and artillerymen. On 28 August, Dimitrov noted in his diary a discussion with Soviet Politburo members about the possible organisation of an 'international corps'. Among his subsequent diary entries on aid to Spain were notes on 3 September to 'send a special man to Paris to help the French with the purchase and transport of arms and airplanes' and, on 14 September, the organisation of a 'smuggling scheme'. On 18 September Comintern's leadership passed a resolution on various measures to aid Republican Spain, including the recruitment of workers with military experience. By 28 September, Thorez could report that the French party had 'commenced the implementation of the task assigned to us. The group of volunteers and transportation of the first 1000 have been provided with necessary personnel and funds'. These and other volunteers began to assemble in Spain and on 22 October the first three battalions of the International Brigades were formed.²⁹

In early September an international committee began meeting in London with the task of supervising the non-intervention commitments of the various states who had ratified the French declaration, including Germany, Italy, Portugal and the USSR. Throughout its life span, the Soviets used the committee as a platform to expose Fascist-Nazi aid to Franco whilst at the same time resisting moves to discuss its own intervention in Spain. The Soviet representative on the committee was the Soviet ambassador to Great Britain, Ivan Maisky. His memoir of the committee – *Spanish Notebooks* – remains a classic of civil war literature.³⁰ However, during its early days he was on holiday and his deputy, S.B. Kagan, attended committee meetings.

On 7 October, Kagan made a rather dramatic intervention at that day's

committee meeting. Having detailed various Portuguese violations of the non-intervention agreement, he then stated:

The Soviet Government is afraid that in a situation of repeated infringements, an agreement on non-intervention does not actually exist. In no circumstances can the Soviet government allow the non-intervention agreement to become a screen concealing military aid to rebels against the legitimate government of Spain. In this regard, the Soviet government is compelled to state that if violations of the non-intervention agreement do not cease immediately, it will consider itself free from the obligations arising under the agreement.

These were the very words Stalin had scribbled on a draft of Kagan's statement.³¹ As a follow-up to this missive, Stalin directed that if the committee did not do anything about Portugal's violations, the Soviet representative should state that the non-intervention agreement was a mere piece of paper and there should be a return to the position wherein the Spanish government had the right to buy arms from any country that wanted to supply them.³²

A further indication of Stalin's hard-line position on the Spanish question was *Pravda's* publication of his telegram of solidarity to Diaz on 16 October:

The workers of the Soviet Union are merely carrying out their duty in giving help within their power to the revolutionary masses of Spain. They are aware that the liberation of Spain from the yoke of fascist reactionaries is not a private affair of the Spanish people but the common cause of the whole of advanced and progressive mankind.³³

Once again, Litvinov was outwith the decision-making loop, this time because he was in Geneva attending a session of the League of Nations. Aghast at Stalin's threat to collapse the non-intervention agreement, he strove to soften the Soviet stance. On 21 October he wrote to Stalin urging him not to 'blow up' the committee or 'liquidate' the non-intervention agreement. Instead, Litvinov proposed the addition of a crucial qualifying phrase to Kagan's statement of 7 October: the USSR would not be bound to the non-intervention agreement to a greater extent than any other state.³⁴ In other words, as long as Germany and Italy continued to supply the rebels, the Soviets would remain free to aid Republican Spain, whilst at the same time pushing on the non-intervention committee for agreements

that would curtail foreign support for Franco. Stalin and the Politburo accepted Litvinov's amendment, and on 23 October Maisky presented the revised statement to the non-intervention committee.

Litvinov's constructive approach bore little or no fruit. The most he could report to the Soviet leadership a year later was that 'our participation in the London committee has from the very beginning caused France, and especially England, much embarrassment, preventing them from deceiving public opinion and making difficult an internal deal with Germany and Italy'. While the Nyon agreement of September 1937 did stop Italian attacks on neutral shipping, it was negotiated outside of the non-intervention committee, and the same was true of agreements that led to the withdrawal of foreign volunteers from Spain in 1938.³⁵

The 23 October statement to the non-intervention committee constituted the legal-political framework for continued Soviet supplies to Spain. Operation X was supervised by Voroshilov but he reported to Stalin on a regular basis, as did many other Soviet officials involved in mounting the operation. It was Stalin who decided what arms were sent to Spain, in what quantities and at what price. All decisions of any significance in relation to Spain – and a good many not-so-important ones – were taken by Stalin or by the Politburo at his behest. It was Stalin who recalled Antonov-Ovseenko and Rozenberg to Moscow following criticisms of their over-zealous interference in Spain's internal affairs (both men perished in the purges). It was Stalin who vetoed the idea of Spanish medals being bestowed on Soviet citizens. It was Stalin who urged a merger between the Spanish communist and socialist parties. It was Stalin who blocked the publication of articles in the Soviet press about the exploits of Red Army pilots in Spain. It was Stalin who prohibited attacks on Italian and German shipping and decreed that attacks on mutineers' ships should take care not to hit foreign vessels. It was Stalin who decided the salaries of Soviets serving in Spain. It was Stalin who ordered Litvinov in July 1938 to resist Spanish requests for a new loan because the USSR faced a growing threat from Japan in the Far East, though he did not rule out further credits for the purchase of small amounts of bread and military equipment. It was Stalin who authorised the withdrawal of the International Brigades from Spain in the autumn of 1938.³⁶

Stalin did not always get his own way. In February 1938 he said Spain's communists should exit the government because 'if they leave, this will help the disintegration of Franco's front' and 'help the international position of the Spanish Republic'. However, the view of the Italian Communist and Comintern leader, Palmiro Togliatti ('Ercoli'), who was in Spain at

the time, was that the communists should play an even greater role in the government. In the event, the Spanish cabinet was reorganised, but one communist remained in it.³⁷

Stalin must have spent many hours discussing Spain with his closest comrades but apart from some fragments in Dimitrov's diary, we have limited information about what he said. We know, for example, that in February 1937 Stalin and the Politburo discussed the situation in Spain with various military experts but no transcript of the meeting is currently available.³⁸

In relation to Stalin's global thinking about the Spanish civil war the best-known source is his letter to Caballero dated 21 December 1936, which was co-signed by Voroshilov and by Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet Prime Minister, but the draft of the document had been thoroughly revised by Stalin ten days earlier, indeed, all the letter's substantive political content was composed by Stalin. It was Stalin's letter to Caballero, even though his signature appeared last.³⁹

Responding to fraternal greetings from Caballero, Stalin began by reaffirming wholehearted Soviet support for the Spanish government. Unlike Russia; noted Stalin, Spain's path to revolution could be a parliamentary one. Even so, the experience of Russia's civil war might have a certain importance for Spain and that was why the Soviet Union had responded to Caballero's requests for military advisers. The role of these advisers was strictly advisory and the same applied to Ambassador Rozenberg. Indeed, Stalin asked Caballero for his opinion of Rozenberg and whether he should be replaced by another representative. The letter concluded with four pieces of political advice (all inserted by Stalin into the draft of the letter): pay attention to the peasantry and agrarian issues; try to attract the 'petty and middle urban bourgeoisie' to the government side, or at least keep them neutral by protecting their property from confiscation and safeguarding their freedom to trade; retain the Republican party in the governing coalition, thus securing it from accusations of communism and providing a pretext for foreign intervention; and make clear the Spanish government will not condone any attacks on the property and interests of foreigners from states which do not support the rebels.⁴⁰

Stalin held no official government post and before the Second World War he rarely met foreign diplomats or politicians. But he spent hours meeting and talking to the Spanish ambassador, Marcelino Pascua.

Caballero appointed Pascua in September and Spain's first ambassador to the USSR arrived in the Soviet capital in early October. His mission was to establish close relations with Soviet leaders and do everything he

could to secure arms supplies. Cheered and feted in Moscow, Pascua was pushing at an open door. The only Soviet bigwig he did not get to see immediately was Stalin because the dictator was still on vacation.⁴¹ But Pascua subsequently met Stalin in his Kremlin office six times: 2 February 1937 (five hours); 11 March (three and a half hours); 10 April (four hours); 2 August (three hours); 13 February 1938 (three hours); and 20 August (three hours).⁴² During period of the civil war, Stalin met only one other foreign diplomat – the American ambassador Joseph Davies – and then only once (in June 1938).⁴³

The only available Soviet record of Stalin's meetings with Pascua are some notes on their first encounter in the dictator's Kremlin office, which was also attended by Molotov and Voroshilov. According to the Soviet interpreter (Kaluzhsky), most of the meeting was devoted to practical matters but he did note some general observations by Stalin such as Spain urgently needed to create its own arms industry and it was a bad idea for the communists to be part of the Republican government because it enabled Franco to play the 'red scare' card. When Pascua decried the historically poor quality of Spanish state leaders, Stalin objected: 'That's wrong. The Spanish people have a great history. Two great Roman emperors were Spaniards – Trajan and Hadrian. Trajan built a wall around ancient Britain. When I told Eden this, he found it useful to know', joked Stalin.⁴⁴

In March 1937, the anti-fascist Andalusian poet, Rafael Alberti and his wife, the writer Maria-Teresa Leon, visited the Soviet Union. On their previous visit to Moscow in 1934 they had attended the First Soviet Writers' Congress. This time they were honoured by an audience with Stalin. According to Leon's later memoir, the meeting was a surprise and on Stalin's initiative. According to Stalin's appointments diary, the meeting took place in his Kremlin office on 20 March and lasted for two hours. Most unusually, only Stalin, the two writers and an interpreter from the Comintern Secretariat – Serafima Gopner – were present. Interviewed by the Soviet press about the meeting, Alberti waxed lyrical:

We were astonished at the correctness and clarity of his words and judgements on Spanish affairs. He told us very cordially about our heroes, our leaders, our peasants, and writers, With an affectionate smile, he spoke of his sympathy for our brave youth.⁴⁵

Gopner reported to Dimitrov that Stalin had told the two writers that while the Spanish people were not in a position to bring about a

proletarian revolution because of unfavourable internal and international conditions, 'on a global scale Spain is the now vanguard' and that 'victory in Spain will loosen fascism's hold in Italy and Germany'. He advised communists and socialists to join forces, arguing that 'such a union will strengthen the Popular Front and have a great effect on the anarchists'. He supported Caballero's retention as head of the government but thought he should leave military command to someone else. On the other hand, Stalin warned that the Spanish General Staff was unreliable, pointing out that 'there has always been betrayal on the eve of an offensive by Republican units'. Madrid must under no circumstances be surrendered, said Stalin, but he believed in a Republican victory: 'after overt intervention by the Italians and Germans, the Spanish Republic will fight harder, as defenders against foreign conquerors'.

On the very eve of the Spanish Republic's fall In March 1939, Stalin gave a speech to the eighteenth party congress which made no mention of Franco's imminent victory. Instead, Stalin focussed on German and Italian military intervention in Spain and designated it an episode in the new imperialist world war that had begun with Italy's seizure of Abyssinia in 1935. He also deftly re-defined the concept of non-intervention as not neutrality but conniving by British and French appeasers to embroil the Soviet Union in a war with Germany. It was a big and dangerous game, warned Stalin, that would end in a fiasco for Britain and France.⁴⁶

The Spanish Republic was gone but the political lessons of the civil war were far from forgotten. During the civil war, Dimitrov and the Comintern had begun, with Stalin's approval, to develop a new concept of the road to revolution. Dimitrov defined the political aim of the civil war as not just the defence of the Republic but the fight for 'a special state with genuine people's democracy. It will not yet be a Soviet state but it will be an anti-fascist left-wing state with a genuine people's democracy'. In a keynote analysis of the 'Specific Features of the Spanish Revolution', Togliatti argued the civil war was a national revolutionary war – a national revolution, a people's revolution and an anti-fascist revolution which was anti-reaction and anti-feudal and aimed at completing the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Spain, which would result in a new type of democracy based on popular power.⁴⁷

This idea of a 'new democracy' based on people's power was revived at the end of the Second World War in the context of the liberation of Europe from Fascism and Nazism. The international balance of forces was against Spain's new democracy, but this time it would be different. Stalin himself preached the virtues of a parliamentary road to socialism to

European communist leaders and gave much the same advice as he had to Caballero during the civil war. He urged Spanish communists to adopt a similar approach, though in their case it entailed continuing armed struggle against Franco. There was substantial Soviet aid to the Greek communists in their civil war but unlike Greece, Spain was definitively in the western sphere of influence. Hence the Soviets focussed on securing international support for the political and diplomatic isolation of Franco's Spain. At the end of the 1940s Stalin called off the communists' armed struggle in both Greece and Spain.⁴⁸

Among the foreign dignitaries at Stalin's funeral in 1953 was one of his most passionate supporters, Dolores Ibárruri, who in 1940 had recalled the 'day of jubilation and joy in Republican Spain' when his telegram to Diaz was published. Stalin, wrote Ibárruri, 'lived in the hearts of all who fought and worked for a Spain freed from its age-old enemies'.⁴⁹ Spain's communists were as fulsome in their tributes to the dead dictator as those of any other country but their perceptions and historical memory changed radically following Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the twentieth CPSU congress in 1956. The onus shifted to distancing and separating the civil war from Stalin's persona. But while Ibárruri's appraisal was exaggerated, we know now that it was closer to the truth than those who sought to deny Stalin's centrality and importance to the successes as well as the failures of the Republican cause.

Notes

- 1 I am greatly indebted to the writings of Daniel Kowalsky, especially his *Stalin and the Spanish Civil War*, New York, 2004. I am also grateful to Michael Carley for giving me access to the Spain chapter of his forthcoming book *Stalin's Failed Alliance: The Struggle for Collective Security, 1936-1939*.
- 2 Yu. Rybalkin, *Sovetskaya Voennaya Pomoshch' Respublikanskoy Ispanii (1936-1939)*, Moscow, 2000, pp44-45. A fuller and slightly different set of figures may be found in A.V. Shubin, 'Stalin i Ispanskaya Respublika (1936-1939)' in *Russkii Sbornik 10: SSSR i Grazhdanskaya Voina v Ispanii, 1936-1939*, Moscow, 2016, p63. See further G. Howson, *Arms for Spain: The Untold Story of the Spanish Civil War*, London, 1998.
- 3 Angel Vinas, 'The Financing of the Spanish Civil War', in Paul Preston (ed.), *Revolution and War in Spain, 1931-1939*, London, 1985, pp266-283.
- 4 The activities of the Soviet military in Spain during the civil war are documented in *RKKA i Grazhdanskaya Voina v Ispanii, 1936-1939gg: Sbornik Informatsionnykh Materialov Razvedyvatel'nogo Upravleniya RKKA*, vols 1-3, Moscow, 2019-2020.

- 5 David T. Cattell, *Soviet Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War*, Los Angeles, CA, 1957; *International Solidarity with the Spanish Republic, 1936-1939*, Moscow 1974; Lisa Kirschenbaum, *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War*, Cambridge, 2015; and Giles Tremlett, *The International Brigades*, London, 2020.
- 6 Geoffrey Roberts, 'Soviet Foreign Policy and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939' in Christian Leitz and David J. Dunthorn (eds), *Spain in an International Context, 1936-1959*, Oxford, 1999, pp95-96.
- 7 Ivo Banac (ed.), *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933-1949*, New Haven, CT, 2003, p67 (hereafter: *Dimitrov Diary*).
- 8 Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*, New Haven, CT, 2015, pp153-157.
- 9 The key documentary collection is Sergey Kudryashov (ed.), *SSSR i Grazhdanskaya Voina v Ispanii, 1936-1939*, Moscow, 2013, (hereafter: *SSSR i Grazhdanskaya Voina*).
- 10 A.V. Shubin, 'Sovetskaya Pomoshch' Ispanskoi Respublike (1936-1939)', *Novaya i Noveishaya Istoriya*, no.3, 2016. A Spanish version of Shubin's findings may be found here: '¿Stalin Abandono La Republica? Las Relaciones entre España y la Unión Soviética en el Último Año de La Guerra Civil (1938-1939)', in *Relaciones hispano-soviéticas durante la Guerra Civil española: Colección de materiales y documentos*, Moscow, 2021.
- 11 See Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's Library: A Dictator and His Books*, New Haven, CT, 2022, passim.
- 12 Reports in *Pravda* and *Izvestiya* under the heading 'Voenno-Fashistskii Myatezh v Ispanii' on 20, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27 and 29 July 1936.
- 13 *SSSR i Grazhdanskaya Voina*, docs 1-3.
- 14 *Glazami Razvedki. SSSR i Evropa, 1919-1938 gody*, Moscow, 2015, doc. 175, p448. We do not know if Stalin saw this report but it seems likely that he did.
- 15 Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck, Grigory Sevostianov (eds), *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union and the Spanish Civil War*, New Haven, CT, 2001, doc 10.
- 16 Stalin's handwritten correction of Krestinsky's draft, Rossiyskiy Gosudarstvennyy Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoy Istorii (RGASPI), f. 558, op. 11. d. 318. p5, reproduced on <https://www.prilib.ru/item/1296240>.
- 17 Present at Krestinsky's meeting with Stalin were the Foreign Trade Commissar, Arkady Rozengolts, and David Kandelaki, the Soviet trade representative in Berlin. A.V. Korotkov, A.D. Chernev, A.A. Chernobaev, compilers, *Na Prieme u Stalina*, Moscow, 2008, p191.
- 18 *SSSR i Grazhdanskaya Voina*, docs 10, 12-13, 17, 20; Daniel Kowalsky, 'The Soviet Cinematic Offensive in the Spanish Civil War', *Film History*, vol. 19, 2007, p10.
- 19 *SSSR i Grazhdanskaya Voina*, doc.11.

- 20 Ibid., doc 14.
- 21 A selection of Stalin's correspondence with Kaganovich may be found in R.W. Davies, Oleg V. Khlevniuk and E.A. Rees (eds), *The Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence, 1931-36*, New Haven, CT, 2003 (hereafter: *SKC*). A slightly fuller collection is O.V. Khlevniuk, R.W. Davis, L.P. Kosheleva, E.A. Rees, L.A. Rogovaya, compilers, *Stalin i Kaganovich: Perepiska, 1931-1936 gg.*, Moscow, 2001 (hereafter: *SKP*).
- 22 *SKC*, doc. 131.
- 23 *SKP*, docs 739, 741.
- 24 RGASPI, f. 17, op. 166. d. 563. pp91-93, on <https://www.prilib.ru/item/1296066>.
- 25 *Dimitrov Diary*, pp27-29.
- 26 *SKC*, doc 159.
- 27 *SSSR i Grazhdanskaya Voina*, docs 32, 56.
- 28 *SKP*, doc. 821.
- 29 Fridrikh I. Firsov, Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes (eds), *Secret Cables of the Comintern, 1933-1943*, New Haven, CT, 2014, pp86-87; *Dimitrov Diary*, pp27-32. A facsimile of the Comintern resolution of 18 September may be found on: <https://www.prilib.ru/item/1296645>.
- 30 Ivan Maisky, *Spanish Notebooks*, London, 1966. As Michael Carley's research shows, Maisky's memoir omits coverage of the tactical differences between him and Litvinov in relation to Moscow's Spanish policy, Maisky being much closer to Stalin's more militant policy. See, for example. Michael Jabara Carley, 'Caught in a Cleft Stick: Soviet Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War', in Gaynor Johnson (ed.), *The International Context of the Spanish Civil War*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2009.
- 31 *SKP*, doc. 844. A facsimile of Stalin's handwritten amendment of the draft of Kagan's statement may be found here: <https://www.prilib.ru/item/1296599>.
- 32 *SKP*, doc. 852.
- 33 Telegram from the Central Committee of the CPSU(B) to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Spain, 16 October 1936, on <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1936/10/x01.htm>.
- 34 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 95, pp136-137, reproduced on <https://www.prilib.ru/item/1296619>.
- 35 See further Michael Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War*, London, 1994.
- 36 *SSSR i Grazhdanskaya Voina*, passim.
- 37 Alexander Dallin and F.I. Firsov (eds), *Dimitrov & Stalin, 1934-1943*, New Haven, CT, 2000, pp71-72.
- 38 *SSSR i Grazhdanskaya Voina*, doc. 215.
- 39 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 318, pp10-15.
- 40 For the exchange between Stalin and Caballero, see <https://neodemocracy.blogspot.com/2019/12/stalin-letter-to-and-from-largo.html>. That same day

the Politburo issued strict instructions to Rozenberg that he was to act as an advisor, not a ruler or agitator (*SSSR i Grazhdanskaya Voina*, doc.167).

- 41 On Pascua, see Daniel Kowalsky, 'The Spanish Republic's Diplomatic Mission to Moscow', Parts 1 and 2, *Vestnik SPBGU Istoriya*, vol. 86, 1-2, 2021, <https://www.sciencegate.app/document/10.21638/11701/spbu02.2021.113>.
- 42 Dates and times from *Na Prieme u Stalina*.
- 43 Record of Stalin's conversation with Davies, 5 June 1938, RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 375, pp1-7, reproduced on <https://www.prlib.ru/item/1296006>.
- 44 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 318, pp75-76. Anthony Eden was Britain's deputy foreign minister when he met Stalin in Moscow in March 1935. Unless the interpreter got it wrong, Stalin seems to have confused Trajan with Hadrian, who built the wall that protected England from raiding Scottish tribes.
- 45 Cited in Silvina Schammah Gesser and Alexandra Cheveleva Dergacheva, 'An Engagé in Spain: Commitment and Its Downside in Rafael Alberti's Philo-Sovietism', in Raanan Rein and Joan Maria Thomás (eds), *Spain 1936: Year Zero*, Brighton, 2018, p182.
- 46 J. Stalin, *Leninism*, London, 1940, pp623-626.
- 47 For further details see Roberts, 'Soviet Foreign Policy and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939'.
- 48 See Geoffrey Swain, 'Stalin and Spain, 1944-1948', in Leitz and Dunthorn (eds), *Spain in an International Context, 1936-1959*.
- 49 Dolores Ibárruri, 'Stalin, Leader of Peoples, Man of the Masses', in *The Communist International*, January 1940, No. 1, reproduced on <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ibarruri/1940/01/x01.htm>.