

THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR: AN ANALYSIS

Adam Namm

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Col. Jim Rabon & Col. Mike Meese

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The Spanish Civil War (1936-39) lends itself to analysis using the theories of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. It featured intense passion, military deception, and served as a chessboard for European politics immediately prior to World War II. The character of the war was at once civil, international, and ideological, and its conduct included a preview of technological advances the world would not fully comprehend until several years later. Although the Spanish Civil War is little covered in American classrooms, its carnage rivals that of the U.S. Civil War: 500,000 deaths, of which 300,000 were civilians.

Strategic Context

The fall of the Spanish monarchy under King Alfonso XIII was caused by popular disenchantment. Two million agricultural workers in Spain toiled on others' turf, with 50,000 gentry owning half of the land.¹ The result was poverty on a scale not seen in other parts of Western Europe at that time, including episodes of starvation. Many Spaniards had become intrigued by other governmental systems, including socialism, communism, and even anarchy.

After King Alfonso voluntarily departed Spain in 1931, the new government declared Spain's Second Republic. Following five years of political turbulence marked by labor strikes, a left-wing coalition called the Popular Front narrowly defeated its conservative rival in 1936. Manuel Azaña, a radical politician, came to power and took steps that infuriated the right-wing: he instituted bold agrarian reforms, granted Catalonia and the Basque region of Asturias political and administrative autonomy, and outlawed several conservative political parties. In a move designed to quell the opposition, Azaña's Republican government transferred key right-wing military leaders away from

mainland Spain. General Francisco Franco, an outspoken opponent of the Azaña regime, was sent to govern the Canary Islands.

Although the Azaña government's reforms angered conservatives, what truly outraged them was the stance the Republicans took against the Catholic Church, which had always been an active member of the political establishment and had controlled Spain's educational system. Many Republican supporters felt enmity toward the Church and the more radical among them began a campaign of burning religious buildings, which led the Azaña government to close Catholic schools to protect them from arson. When the Church criticized Azaña for not doing more to stop the arsonists, Azaña inflamed the passions of conservatives by replying that burning "all the convents in Spain was not worth the life of a single Republican."²

With Spain in economic turmoil due to capital flight out of the country, Franco and other self-proclaimed Nationalist military officers began plotting a revolt against the Republican government. When the Popular Front government got wind of the possible insurrection it armed left-wing organizations opposing the uprising, leading the Nationalists to officially proclaim the revolt on July 19, 1936.

A Brutal War And A Chessboard for Europe

In 1936 the Spanish Army was composed of two distinct forces: the Peninsular (mainland) Army, which had 120,000 men but was poorly trained, and the Morocco-based Army of Africa. The Army of Africa, although it numbered only 34,000, was battle-hardened from colonial conflicts and included well-disciplined Spanish Foreign Legion units. Franco was a long-time member of the Army of Africa had served in the right-wing Foreign Legion earlier in his career. The majority of Army of Africa troops

followed Franco to the Nationalist side, while an estimated 25,000 men in the Peninsular Army, including some of the most skilled officers, also joined the Nationalists. Without a well-trained officer corps, the Republicans suffered poor operational and tactical coordination.³

Germany and Italy both supplied troops and war machinery to the Nationalists, which helped tip the balance of military power. The Germans provided a “Condor Legion” with 19,000 soldiers plus the latest aircraft. Italy provided 50,000 troops and 250 planes. The *Luftwaffe*’s bombing of civilians was new to war and marked a new level of brutality, exemplified by the destruction of Guernica in 1937. The small town in northern Spain was the center of Basque nationalism, and like other civilian population centers was bombed by the Germans to break the will of Republican supporters. The town was first struck by explosive and incendiary bombs, and then as people fled from their homes they were machine-gunned by fighter planes. It is estimated that 1,700 people were killed and 900 injured in the three-hour attack. A London Times reporter wrote at the time, “Guernica was not a military objective...The object of the bombardment was seemingly the demoralization of the civil population and the destruction of the cradle of the Basque race.”⁴ At the Nuremberg trials following World War II, *Luftwaffe* commandant Hermann Goering was unapologetic about Germany’s seminal use of carpet bombing in the Spanish Civil War, saying, “Spain gave me an opportunity to try out my young air force.”⁵

The USSR provided aid to the Republicans in the form of more than 1,000 aircraft and the pilots to fly them, but Soviet expertise was not as advanced as that of Germany. More importantly, Soviet involvement helped to scare the United Kingdom and France,

already fearful of conflict with powerful Germany, away from involvement in the war. Neither country wanted to fight alongside the USSR at a time when the communist threat to western democracies seemed credible.

When the Spanish Civil War began, the UK and France, anxious to prevent a general European conflict, proposed a non-intervention pact, which was signed in August 1936 by 27 nations. (The signatories included Italy, Germany, and the USSR, all of which failed to keep their promises.) Although the U.S. was not a signatory to the non-intervention pact, President Roosevelt -- under pressure from American Catholics -- banned the export of arms to Spain in 1937.⁶ The lack of assistance from the three preeminent democracies helped to ensure the Republicans' defeat. Julio Alvarez de Vayo, Republican Spain's last foreign minister, commented, "No one should be able to deny that the collapse of the Spanish Republic was due to non-intervention." Lord Strabogli of England perceived the Spanish Republicans to be a bulwark against fascism and declared the UK's lack of involvement in the war as "malevolent neutrality."⁷

Many private citizens from around the globe shared Strabogli's view and took action by coming to Spain to fight on the side of the Republicans. These freedom fighters hated fascism and equated the defense of Republican Spain with the defense of the greater democratic western world. They included George Orwell and Ernest Hemmingway and collectively comprised the International Brigades, confirming that the Spanish Civil War aroused external as well as internal passions.

The Nationalist campaign was marked by fierce fighting and brutal purges of Republicans from conquered territory. The Nationalists professed themselves to be the defenders of European civilization against alien forces and so had little mercy for their

enemy compatriots.⁸ After war's end in 1939, the Franco regime imprisoned some one million Republicans and executed approximately 50,000 over following four years.

The Clausewitz Perspective

The Nationalists had an advantage over the Republicans vis-à-vis all three components of Clausewitz's trinity. While there was ample passion on both sides, the Nationalists' sentiment may be traced all the way back to the *reconquista* -- reconquest -- of Spain from the Moors, which was completed in 1492. The Nationalists demonized the Republicans for allowing Catalonian and Basque autonomy, which they saw as a blow to the unified Spain past generations fought hard to reassemble following Arab occupation. The Nationalists also still stung from Spain's embarrassing loss to the United States in the Spanish-American War and viewed the Republican government as a return to national decay.

Republican passions had been aroused by class inequity, but the Azaña government engendered stronger revanchist passions by stripping away the underpinnings of Spanish society, most notably the power of the Church. For Franco and his compatriots, verbal and physical attacks against the Church were incendiary, especially considering Spain's historic battle against Moslem conquerors. (Similarly, President Bush's recent use of 'crusade' to describe the war on terrorism incited Islamic fundamentalists.)

While passion worked to unify the political (rational) objectives of various right-wing factions over the course of the war, the Republicans suffered from entropy. Republican conscription and the re-introduction of ranks and insignia alienated the Popular Front's base.⁹ Moderate elements of the Popular Front stressed the war effort, while more radical factions wanted to make revolution before concentrating on the fight

against the Nationalists. Soviet intervention intensified these internal divisions.¹⁰

Indeed, one historian surmised that, if the Republics had won the war, a power struggle between communists and anarchists would have ensued, perhaps even another civil war.¹¹

Meanwhile, the Nationalists, rallying behind Franco and the glory of Spain, had a clear political goal and were unified in achieving this end via military means.

Regarding the final element of Clausewitz's trinity, chance, the axis powers' entry into the war tipped the balance of power in favor of the Nationalists. Although the USSR came to the aid of the Republicans, they were no match for the more skilled Nationalists, who had German might and superior technology on their side.

Clausewitz would also say Franco had a *coup d'oeil* that helped win the war for the Nationalists. Franco was both a military and political leader and so there was no inconsistency between these two critical elements. Franco also understood that Republican Spain was a threat to fascist regimes in Germany and Italy and bet correctly he could enlist their assistance to help the Nationalists win the war. On the other hand, Franco perceived that the UK and France would not intervene in the war because they feared conflict with Germany. Franco thus had the ability to 'hover' at the center of the Clausewitz triangle by exploiting the passions of Spaniards for *reconquista*, the national politics at play in Europe, and the military expertise brought by him and his fellow Nationalist generals, the last of which was augmented by the support of co-fascists Hitler and Mussolini.

Finally, Clausewitz might say that the civil nature of the war, as well as the participation of foreigners, led to a high degree of fog and friction. Fighting was city-to-city, town-to-town, with many Spaniards acting as spies against the other side.

The Sun Tzu Perspective

This fog and friction allowed the Nationalist side to employ deceptive tactics that Sun Tzu considered crucial to success in war. For example, the Nationalists used saboteurs planted among the population of key cities. A Nationalist general leading four army columns toward Madrid in 1939 referred to Nationalist sympathizers in the Spanish capital as his “fifth column,” which became a generic term for groups of secret supporters engaging in sabotage. In another act of deception, Franco denied that the Nationalists had anything to do with the bombing of Guernica, asserting the town had been dynamited and then burnt by Anarchist brigades. After the war, a telegram sent from Franco's headquarters was discovered and revealed that he had asked the German Condor Legion to carry out the attack.¹² Perhaps the most heinous deceit came at the conclusion of the war, when some Catholic priests questioned Republican prisoners about their wartime activities during confession and then passed the responses to military tribunals.¹³

The Republicans also employed deceptive tactics with help from the USSR. In addition to regular troops, Stalin sent Soviet advisers to train partisan guerrillas to make bombs and grenades, set ambushes, and carry out raids.¹⁴ Several years later, the Soviets would make use of guerilla tactics developed during the Spanish Civil War in their defense of the USSR against the Nazis.

With regard to Sun Tzu’s five fundamental factors of war, the Nationalists had a marked advantage. The Nationalist crusade to stop what they perceived as Spain’s slide into an abyss of political and moral depravity gave its supporters superior moral influence, which Sun Tzu described as “that which causes the people to be in harmony

with their leaders, so that they will accompany them in life and unto death without fear or mortal peril.”¹⁵ While right-wingers rallied around Franco, elements of the Popular Front were splintering apart, eroding the moral influence that reached its apogee for the Republicans before the war began. Regarding doctrine, the Nationalists’ superior military capabilities and axis support ensured they had the upper hand. To use Sun Tzu’s words, the Nationalists had better “organization, control, assignment of appropriate ranks to officers, regulation of supply routes, and the provision of principle items used by the army.”¹⁶ Moreover, Germany and Italy widened this doctrinal advantage both through their assistance to the Nationalists and by attacking Republican centers of gravity. For one, the *Luftwaffe* flew 16,000 Nationalist troops, who had been serving under Franco’s command in the Army of Africa, from Morocco to Spain, the first instance of air transport of large numbers of troops in history.¹⁷ Also, the Italian air force waged a bombing campaign against Soviet materiel shipments to Spain in mid-1937, cutting the Republicans’ major line of supply.¹⁸ A third factor discussed by Sun Tzu is command, and here the Nationalists benefited from superior leadership and Franco’s aforementioned *coup d’oeil*. (Sun Tzu’s other two factors of war, weather and terrain, were equivalent for both sides but better exploited by the Nationalists due to their marked advantage in the other three areas.)

Sun Tzu would quarrel with the Nationalists’ prosecution of the Spanish Civil War because there was little employment of the indirect approach. While Sun Tzu said, “He who knows the art of the direct and the indirect approach will be victorious,”¹⁹ the Nationalists won by employing blunt force rather than indirect methods. Sun Tzu also cautioned against attacking an enemy’s cities, which the Nationalists did with help from

Germany and Italy. On the other hand, Sun Tzu was a proponent of breaking the enemy's will, and so might appreciate the devastating air bombing and Republican purges used by the Nationalists. Sun Tzu might say that these tactics represented the *chi*, or unconventional warfare, waged by the Nationalists. In addition, Sun Tzu said that attacking an enemy's alliances was key to victory, and the Nationalists and their axis supporters did this by cutting Soviet supply lines and by taking actions to preclude other allies from supporting the Republicans.

Finally, Sun Tzu advised combatants to take a state intact with minimal damage to infrastructure. Although air bombing wreaked terrible destruction, the Nationalists' primary end was to reconstitute Spain, and in this sense they met Sun Tzu's objective of re-taking an 'intact' state.

Ends, Means, Ways, and Consequences

Using the National War College strategic framework to analyze the Spanish Civil War, one can say the Nationalists' focus on a discrete end, coupled with superior means provided by their military expertise and augmented by Germany and Italy, sealed the Republicans fate. The harsh ways in which Nationalist military prowess were employed harkened a horrible new era in modern warfare, in which civilian populations were not only fair game but also strategic objectives. The brutal air bombing gave credence to Giulio Douhet's theory of using such tactics to break the will of the enemy.

The consequences for each side also helped determine the outcome of the war. For the Republicans, the lack of a clear end state meant the Spanish polity became unwilling to risk blood and treasure as the war dragged on and the Nationalists gained the advantage. A weak Republican strategic concept was defeated by a Nationalist side that

viewed the war as a mortal struggle for the very existence of Spain. As the war dragged on and the Republicans became increasingly fractured, it gave the Nationalists greater resolve to impose their desired political end state on the country. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so did Franco.

Epilogue

The Nationalist victory was decisive and lasted for thirty-six years. Fascist Germany and Italy were defeated only six years after the conclusion of the Spanish Civil War, leading to a democratic Western Europe under the protection of the United States. Franco allied himself with the U.S. in the face of the Soviet threat and allowed U.S. military bases in Spain under the 1953 Pact of Madrid. It was thus merely a matter of time before Spain joined the community of liberal democracies, which occurred upon Franco's death in 1975 and illustrated Clausewitz's maxim that the result of war is never final. The Republicans had lost the war but their principles ultimately triumphed.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Pierre Broué and Emile Témime, The Revolution and the Civil War in Spain (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1970), 34.
- ² Spartacus, <<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk>> (25 October 2003), Spanish Civil War.
- ³ Felipe Ribeiro de Meneses, Franco and the Spanish Civil War (New York: Routledge, 2001).
- ⁴ University of California at San Diego, History Department, <<http://www.history.ucsd.edu/gen/WW2Timeline/Prelude07>> (25 October 2003), “Spanish Civil War.”
- ⁵ U.S. Centennial of Flight Commission, <http://www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Air_Power/Spansh_CW/AP18> (24 October 2003), “Aerial Warfare and the Spanish Civil War.”
- ⁶ Anthony Beevor, The Spanish Civil War (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1982), 282.
- ⁷ Douglas Little, Malevolent Neutrality (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 8-10.
- ⁸ Beevor, 281.
- ⁹ Spartacus.
- ¹⁰ Imperial War Museum, <<http://www.iwm.org.uk>> (25 October 2003), Spanish Civil War exhibition.
- ¹¹ Beevor, 281.
- ¹² Spartacus.
- ¹³ Beevor, 267.
- ¹⁴ A.K. Starinov, Behind Fascist Lines: A Firsthand Account of Guerrilla Warfare During the Spanish Revolution (Ballantine Books, 2001).
- ¹⁵ Sun Tzu, The Art of War (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 64.
- ¹⁶ Sun Tzu, 65.
- ¹⁷ James S. Corum, “The Spanish Civil War: Lessons Learned and Not Learned by the Great Powers,” The Journal of Military History 62, no. 2 (1998): 313-334.

¹⁸ Spartacus.

¹⁹ Sun Tzu, 106.