

The Spanish Civil War

On July 18th, 1936 the Generals of the Spanish Army led a revolt against the Republican government. They expected little or no resistance but they were wrong.

The Spanish Civil War was a war of contradictions and internal fighting among the parties. Both sides found it difficult to keep the support of their followers. Both sides were in violent opposition to each other.

The Spanish Civil War was a war of ideals fought by soldiers who thought that God or History was on their side. It foreshadowed many aspects of the Second World War whilst at the same time lived back to an earlier age. At times it seemed to be a war of Medieval ferocity fought with Twentieth Century technology.

The Government has the support of all the Left-Wing political parties. These included the Republicans, the Socialists, the Communists and the Anarchists. In addition the Trade Unions were with the Government and in the early stages they provided the militias against the army. Within Spain's territory were two regions that had always wanted their autonomy, the areas of Catalan and Basque. These Nationalists received their autonomy from the Republicans so they also pledged their support against the military. To make matters more difficult certain sections of the military were loyal to the Republicans. They received support from some Armed and Para-Military forces namely Naval Seamen (but not officers), a large part of the Air Force, some units of the Peninsular Army, sections of the Guardia Civil [national police force] the Carabineros [frontier guards] and most of the Asaltos [national riot police].

In the early stages of the war the French Socialist Government donated military materials and the Mexican Government continually supplied aid. Further aid came from Russia and foreign volunteers.

The Insurgents (soon to be known as the Nationalists) had the support of the Army of Africa (the most battle-hardy units in the Spanish Army), the remainder of the Peninsular Army, Guardia Civil, Carabineros, Asaltos and the Right-Wing and Traditionalist political parties. These parties included the Monarchists, the Carlists, and the Falange. In addition, the Catholic church supported the Insurgents. The Nationalists also received foreign military aid. The Right-wing governments of Italy and Germany sent "volunteers", tanks, aircraft and artillery to aid the Nationalist cause. As too were small numbers of Portuguese, French and Irish volunteers.

The war began throughout Morocco and Spain as military garrisons rose up in revolt against the Republican Government. On July 19, 1936 the Insurgents (Nationalists) had seized power in Morocco, Navarre, Galicia, Old Castille and Seville but they were unable to capture the two main cities of Barcelona and Madrid.

The leader of the military, General Francisco Franco took control of the army in Africa. He then asked for military aid and technical assistance from Mussolini and Hitler. In July of 1936 the first shipment of French aircraft were sent to aid the Republicans. The following day Adolph Hitler agreed to send military aid to Franco and the Nationalists. By the end of July German and Italian transport aircraft were airlifting the Army of Africa from Morocco to the mainland. In August the Nationalists began their main offensive.

On August 8, 1936 the French government suddenly stopped further sales of arms and ammunition to Republican Spain. This marked the beginning of the Non-Intervention Policy. On August 28th the Nationalists bombed Madrid for the first time. By now the Nationalists had united within Spain and during September the Nationalists gained more control of the nation. Italian aircraft were now stationed on the island of Majorca from where they could freely bomb the Republic.

On September 9th, 1936 several Western-European countries met in London to form a Non-Intervention Committee. The plan was for Spain to be left alone and settle its own Civil War. However not all of the European nations were in agreement. On October 1, 1936 General Franco was self-proclaimed Commander-In-Chief (Generalissimo) and Head of State.

Eleven days later the first Russian aid arrived to assist the new Republican Popular Army, an incorporation of the army units that had remained loyal to the Republicans and the Party Militias. To pay for this a large part of Spain's Gold Reserve was given by the Republicans to Russia. Russian tanks and aircraft now appeared in the front-lines. In response German and Italian bombers began a series of raids on Madrid, hoping to destroy any civilian resistance prior to an invasion. Russian fighters took to the skies over Madrid against the bombers.

In early November 1936 the Republicans feared that Madrid was going to fall to the Nationalists so they moved to Valencia. A defense army was left to try and hold Madrid.

The Nationalists felt that an all-out attack on Madrid would capture the capital city and end the war. During the first two weeks of November fierce fighting took place within Madrid. The Nationalists, aided by the Russians stopped the Nationalist advance after they captured three-quarters of the city. Both sides then dug-in and let the German and Italian air forces bomb the city sections not taken. In December Nationalist aircraft began to bomb the second largest city of Barcelona.

From December 1936 onwards there were eleven major territorial battles for eight provinces or cities within Spain. Each had fierce fighting, heavy casualties and extensive damage. Both Republicans and Nationalists had victories but by March of 1938 the Nationalists had the upper hand. On March 16th to the 18th Barcelona was subject to round-the-clock bombing by the Nationalists using Italian aircraft based on Majorca, The Republicans attempted to have a Peace Treaty with Franco but he demanded nothing but unconditional surrender. The final battle for Barcelona began on December 23, 1938.

The Nationalists were three miles from the city center when the Republican Government, led by Juan Negrin fled the city. The Republican troops in Barcelona continued to maintain a token resistance but by January 28th they surrendered. Spain was about to totally fall to the Nationalists.

On February 28th, 1939 Manuel Azana resigned from the post of President of the Republic. A Communist Government had formed within Spain separate from the Nationalists and Republicans. It was led by Dr. Negrin. He attempted to have a separate peace treaty by legal action against Franco but all he created was a civil-war-within-a-civil-war on the streets of Madrid. Negrin, now backed by Russia continued to fight against both the Republicans and the Nationalists but soon lost his struggle to the Republicans. Negrin, and his Russian advisors flew out of Madrid to safety. This left the Republican leader, Colonel Casado to try and negotiate a peace treaty with General Franco. Franco stood firm on his earlier statement of unconditional surrender.

On March 28th, 1939, with little or no resistance, the Nationalists entered the capital city of Madrid. The hostilities ceased. Generalissimo Franco announced that the war was over. Spain was now a Dictatorship.

When World War II began Spain stayed out of the war. The nation declared itself "Neutral." It was too damaged to join in the fighting, even though it owed both Germany and Italy a great deal for the revolution. The nation's infrastructure had been destroyed, every city was in ruins. All sections of the armed forces had lost a great deal and were not capable of going to war again as not only were they totally exhausted but decimated by the many battles that took place within Spain.