

Quiet Fronts in the Spanish Civil War

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The Spanish Civil War was one of the great dramas of the twentieth century. The war erupted on 19 July 1936 when a large part of the Spanish military revolted against the Second Republic (1931-39). On one side stood the insurgent officers, upper classes, most Catholics, and the right, which included conservatives, monarchists, and fascists, who were known as the Falange. Opposing the military rebellion were the forces of the left, including anti-clericals, Communists, Socialists, trade unionists of the UGT (Union General de Trabajadores), and anarcho-syndicalists of the CNT (Confederacion Nacional de Trabajo). The supporters of the right became known as the Nationalists and quickly unified under the leadership of Generalissimo Francisco Franco. The left, whose major elements had already coalesced in 1935-36 to form an "anti-fascist" coalition called the Popular Front, became known as Republicans. In the first few months of war, militias recruited from the various parties and unions of the left defended the Republic. By fall most of its components had begun to organize a regular army, called the Popular Army. Nationalist forces would gradually wear it down, and in April 1939 Franco's forces achieved total victory.

Historians of the Spanish Civil War have been fascinated by its major battles, focusing on "decisive" encounters such as Madrid, Guadalajara, Teruel, and the Ebro. No one can deny that major battles had a considerable impact on the outcome of the conflict. Yet in their devotion to analyzing the famous clashes between the Republic and its enemies, historians have usually ignored quiet fronts, that is, situations in which soldiers of opposing camps in close proximity to one another were not aggressive. Quiet fronts were nonetheless the background from which major battles emerged, as nonbelligerency in one area permitted the high command to plan major attacks in another.¹

Just as importantly, soldiers spent much more time on quiet fronts than in major battles. The comparatively rare major clashes involved tens of thousands of troops in a military population that eventually numbered nearly three million, but for each active fighter, there may have been 15 at rest on inactive fronts or at peace in the rear. Spatially, calmness also ruled. Every meter of active trench was matched by kilometers of quiet and even unguarded lines throughout Andalusia, Extremadura, Aragon, and even Castile (see map 1). Until recently, analysts have focused on outcome (i.e., collective winners and losers) rather than on the experience of individual soldiers on either side. Experience and outcome are related, however, and combatants' behavior during

¹ Cf. the monographs of Jose Manuel Martinez Bande, especially *La ofensiva sobre Valencia* (Madrid, 1977), 75.

periods of intense aggression should not be separated from their actions at times of calm. The harshness of everyday life of the common soldier in the Popular Army of the Republic, during a war which few expected to last nearly three years, had an immensely negative effect on performance.²

² John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London, 1976); Richard Holmes, *Acts of War* (New York and London, 1985); Charles Carlton, *Going to the Wars: The Experience of the British Civil Wars, 1638-51* (London and New York, 1992).



Map 1

While scholars have explored the supposedly great men and collectivities—generals, politicians, parties, unions, classes, genders, and armies in battle—social historical explorations “from below” of unknown, anonymous, and non-militant individuals are scarce even though the latter constituted the overwhelming majority. Nor have historians of Spain seen its civil war from the distance of the future consumer society where the struggle for commodities replaced a variety of wartime militancies. The following pages will attempt to address this gap in the literature, focussing mainly on the soldiers of the Popular Army. For whatever reason—and it would be fascinating to find out why—the Republic has left a richer documentary legacy than its opponents. Available sources show that, in contrast to Nationalist forces, the Popular Army lacked food, clothing, and supplies. These deficiencies undermined its willingness to fight. Republican troops deserted in large numbers and fraternized frequently with the Nationalist enemy. Soldiers’ declining commitment and their quest to satisfy material needs anticipated the nonideological consumer of the late 1950s and beyond.

During the first few months of the war, from July 1936 to approximately the end of the year, tranquillity was relatively rare. Yet individual desires for peace and bodily preservation were apparent even at the beginning of the conflict. On neither side did the “masses” volunteer in large numbers to fight, and the number of volunteers in areas controlled by the insurgents was roughly similar relative to population to numbers in the Republican zone. Only Navarre, with its Catholic and monarchical Carlist traditions, was a partial exception, furnishing according to some accounts 10 percent of its population. Yet even here, “more people applauded volunteers than went themselves.”³ In Madrid and its suburbs, which had a population of 1.5 million, fewer than 10,000 offered their services to the Republicans. For example, when Franco’s forces were easily advancing toward the capital in August, hundreds of madrilenos promised to fight, but only 150 fulfilled their commitment. In Catalonia and Valencia, regions which were solidly Republican, enlistment was “remarkably low” given population densities.⁴ Only 18,000 volunteered in Catalonia for the Popular Army, and perhaps 25,000 ended up on the Aragon front in 1936. In the Basque country and in the North in general, the response was more enthusiastic, but even there Republicans imposed conscription between October and December 1936. The lukewarm response to volunteering reveals the low percentage of workers who were firmly committed to a Popular Front organization. The overwhelming majority of wage earners—perhaps 80 or 85 percent—joined a party or union only after the civil war erupted, and then their motivation was less ideological than practical: To keep their jobs, housing, health care, and other benefits they had to have a membership card.⁵

To attract more men, the Republican government promised to hire volunteers as policemen and low-level functionaries after their military service. Most of those who enrolled were not members of political parties and probably were enticed to join by the very attractive salary of 10 pesetas per day, nominally more than three times the daffy pay of foreigners in Franco’s elite foreign legion. Perhaps 75,000 to 100,000 volunteered in the Republican zone compared to 30,000

³ Ramon Salas Larrazabal, *Historia del Ejercito popular de la Republica* (Madrid, 1973), 423, 472, 538; Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York, 1961), 359; Ramon y Jesus Ma. Salas Larrazabal, *Historia general de la guerra de Espana* (Madrid, 1986), 120.

⁴ Julian Casanova, *Anarquismo y revolucion en la sociedad rural aragonesa* (Madrid, 1985), 107; Michael Alpert, *El Ejercito republicano en la guerra civil* (Madrid, 1989), 45, 63.

⁵ See Michael Seidman, *Workers against Work: Labor in Barcelona and Paris during the Popular Fronts* (Berkeley, 1991), 93-94.

in the Nationalist zone. The lack of volunteers led officials in both zones to resort to conscription, although the Republican draft came sooner and involved larger numbers and older men than its Nationalist counterpart. During the conflict, the Republic mobilized 27 age groups, ranging from 18 to 44 years old and totaling 1,700,000 men. The Nationalist government called up only 15 age groups, ranging from 18 to 32 years old, totaling 1,260,000 men. Many with little or no commitment to either side found themselves forced to serve in the armed forces.⁶

Most of the Popular Army was composed of militias, but although they were among the most committed Republican soldiers, some militiamen quickly lost their appetite for combat. In Madrid, militiamen frequently abandoned the front to search for another unit in less danger. Joining hometown militias distant from the front was especially popular. These *desaprensivos* (slackers), as they were called by the high command, were reluctant to sacrifice their bodies but were anxious to retain free meals and their daily stipend. In Aragon, the front quickly became stabilized, that is, it became a quiet front. Despite considerable gaps and unguarded areas in enemy lines, as author and volunteer George Orwell has pointed out, militiamen became unaggressive. In three weeks, Orwell fired only three shots. Another journalist sympathetic to anarcho-syndicalists was astonished that the men took no cover and wandered about in full view and range of the enemy. In this context, it is not surprising that some observers reported that the "presence of prostitutes ... caused more injuries than enemy bullets."⁷

On the Nationalist side, local militias also proved unassertive and had to be supplemented by devout Navarrese *requetes*, Carlist military units. General Mola, the chief organizer of the revolt, ordered troops to maintain an active defense by constantly raiding the enemy, but his commands were largely ignored. Ultimately, the quiet front in Aragon seems to have benefited Nationalists more than Republicans since the latter initially outnumbered the former ten to one. By January 1937, the Republican advantage had dropped to four to one, but still—as in other tranquil sectors—Republicans did not take advantage of their numerical superiority to conquer enemy territory. Largo Caballero, the Republic's prime minister and minister of war, concluded that "discipline, morale, and leadership can multiply military effectiveness by four."⁸ The passivity of Aragon fighters hardly encouraged the Republican leadership to launch eastern offensives.

On the Aragon front in early September 1936, Nationalists reported that the enemy's lack of regular meals for two days had caused its morale to falter. From the beginning of the conflict it was dear the Republic would have a hard time provisioning its troops. Unplanned waste and overconsumption in the first few months, when many believed the uprising would soon fail, had led to a slaughter of livestock and a consequent shortage of meat. Peasants hid what they possessed for fear that Republican soldiers would confiscate it, and collectives—whether controlled by the anarcho-syndicalist CNT or the Socialist UGT—did the same. Peasant fears were not unrealistic since Republican soldiers sometimes did take what they wanted, as they considered the rurals price-gougers and war profiteers who were more than happy to sell above the *tasa* (price maxi-

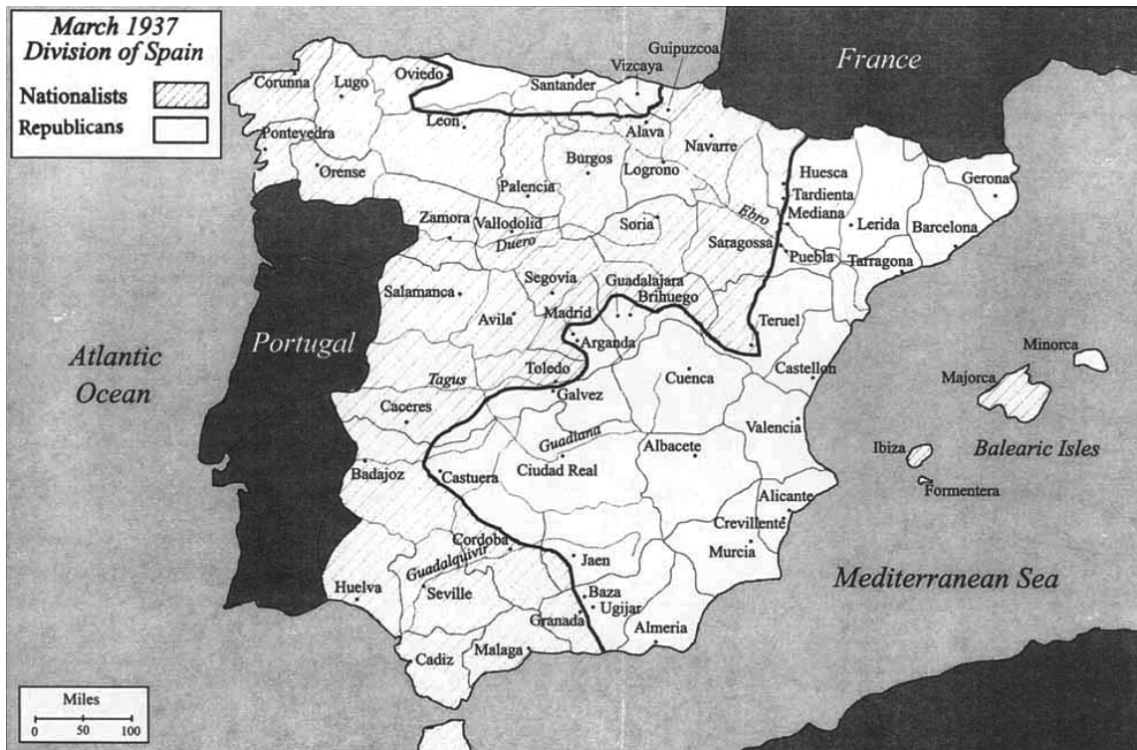
⁶ Ramon y Jesus Salas, *Historia*, 120-24; Alpert, *Ejercito*, 63; Casanova, *Anarquismo*, 85; Guy Hermet, *La guerre d'Espagne* (Paris, 1989), 252.

⁷ Comandancia, 23 October 1936, Servicio Historico Militar (Avila) (hereafter SHM), Zona Republicana (hereafter ZR), a. 94.1. 1334, c. 16; Segunda, 18 October 1936, *ibid.*, c. 10; George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (New York, 1980), 41; Jose Gabriel, *La vida y la muerte en Aragon* (Buenos Aires, 1938), 26-27, 55-56; Jose Manuel Martinez Bande, *La invasion de Aragon y el desembarco en Mallorca* (Madrid, 1970), 65-97.

⁸ La situacion general, 18 January 1937, cited in Martnez Bande, *La invasion de Aragon*, 273.

mum). In Tardienta (Huesca), the CNT, UGT, and IR (Left Republican) members of the Antifascist Committee recounted a militia column's total trashing and looting of the town.⁹

⁹ Ibid., 260; Informe, 20-23 October 1937, AASM-512-25, Fundacion Pablo Iglesias, Madrid; Colectividad, 5 April 1937, Archivo Historico Nacional-Seccion Guerra Civil, Salamanca (hereafter AHN-SGC), Castellon, 254; Caspe, 25 July 1937, AHN-SGC, Barcelona 839; Casanova, Anarquismo, 173, 181; Reunidos, 29 March 1937, AHN-SGC, Barcelona 839.



Map 2

In the fall of 1937, a year after the successful Republican defense of Madrid, the key problem for Popular Army troops in the mountains north of the city was lack of food. The chief health official of the Second Corps reported that calorie intake was insufficient and that troops lacked essential vitamins found in vegetables and fresh fruits. Experts thought that more cases of vitamin deficiency would appear in the near future and fretted over the lack of resources to prevent or treat them. The normal diet for soldiers provided only 2,000 calories, when at least 2,500 and even 4,000 were needed during periods of activity and cold. Hygiene was also substandard. The latrines and sewers functioned poorly, increasing the number of rats. Fleas also thrived due to lack of underwear, infrequent washing, and shortage of disinfectants. Winter socks and shoes were sorely needed. Muddy roads prevented ambulances from reaching the injured, and hospitals lacked competent surgeons. In January 1938 in the 67th Brigade of the Second Army Corps, battle-injured soldiers numbered less than five percent of the ill.¹⁰

Poor rations must have reduced desire to sacrifice for the Republican cause. In the 37th Mixed Brigade in November 1937, soldiers stationed near Madrid received 20 grams of meat, 40 of oil, 20 of sugar, and 10 of salt. In contrast, Nationalist soldiers in 1937 had a normal daily ration of 200 grams of meat, 60 of oil, 50 of sugar, and 15 of salt. In every food group except perhaps dried vegetables such as beans, Nationalist soldiers were better fed. Their diet was also much more varied, and they were able to drink coffee and wine regularly. Franco's quartermasters made special efforts to supply their soldiers with regional dishes, alcoholic beverages, and hot meals during periods of cold and bad weather. When the Republican quartermaster dramatically improved the quantity and quality of meals, veterans suspected that an offensive was forthcoming. "Like pigs being fattened for slaughter,"¹¹ a rural fighter commented.

Nationalist zones had the advantage of being rich in grazing, but this does not entirely explain the superior diet of their troops. Peasants with livestock in Republican zones distrusted soldiers, whom they often feared would take what they wanted. When soldiers of Enrique Lister—one of the most reputed Communist officers of the war—entered Galvez (Toledo), they learned that the Republican units preceding them had mistreated local peasants. In response, 30 families, led by women, fled with their 1,200 animals to the Nationalist side. This move led Lister's political commissar Santiago Alvarez to conclude despondently, "most peasants do not know how to distinguish our forces from those of the fascist army."¹² The stealing and destruction of Republican soldiers stationed in the Sierra de Guadarrama terminated "any desire of the peasants to work for our cause" he reported.¹³ Both officers and men were known for their thefts of livestock and potatoes. Just as significantly, price controls in the Republican zone discouraged peasants from producing a large surplus to sell at mandated low prices.

The lack of supplies (arms, barbed wire, concrete, transport) and training further discouraged aggressive action. On a sector of the Aragon front, at times well over half the Republican bombs and mortars did not explode. Rifles—old Winchesters—were unreliable. The only trustwor-

¹⁰ Boletín, n.d., SHM, Zona Nacional (hereafter ZN), a. 38,1. 14, c. 1; Nota, 10 October 1937, SHM, Cuartel General del Generalísimo (hereafter CGG), a. 5,1. 28, c. 4; Informe, 13 November 1937, SHM, ZR, a. 69,1. 1044, c. 11.

¹¹ Orden, 17 November 1937, SHM, ZR, a. 74,1. 1180, c. 22; Racion normal, n.d., SHM, ZN, a. 41,1. 3, c. 23; Mando, 1 September 1938 and 15 October 1938, SHM, ZN, a. 43,1. 11, c. 93 and c. 101; Minuta, n.d., SHM, ZN, a. 41,1. 3, c. 23; En Zaragoza, 18 May 1938, SHM, ZN, a. 15,1. 1, c. 104; unnamed veteran quoted in Eduardo Pons Prades, *Un soldado de la Republica* (Madrid, 1974), 263-64.

¹² Informe, 8 May 1937, SHM, ZR, a. 58,1. 627 bis, c. 1.

¹³ Informe, 7 November 1937, SHM, ZR, reel 45.

thy weapon was the hand grenade. The result of these deficiencies was a "defensive not offensive posture."¹⁴ It must be said, however, that poor equipment was only a contributing factor in the establishment of informal truces, since possibilities for aggression always existed. After all, with only knives the Moors gained fearsome reputations for silently surprising and slitting the throats of their enemies, and if North Africans wished to intimidate the enemy, their bloodcurdling cries were often sufficient. When troops wanted to be aggressive, high tech was helpful but not absolutely necessary.¹⁵

At the end of 1938, Republican soldiers in Andalusia were sick of life in the trenches. Censors found complaints about food the most common of all complaints. Some lamented the ceaseless diet of rice, olive oil, and bread for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, even on Christmas Day. Others complained of receiving only bread for breakfast, no oil for months, and lentils or dried peas instead of rice. There was no dessert worthy of the name. To protest an insufficient diet, some men refused to perform their olive-picking duty. Others consoled themselves and their families that they were better nourished and clothed than civilians of the pueblo where they were stationed. Letters conveyed the sad spectacle of barefooted women and children who regularly begged for the scanty leftovers of the Popular Army.¹⁶

The unprivileged-civilian or military-agreed that they all might perish from hunger and cold. The "rags" they wore made them feel naked. Two hundred men, it was rumored, already had died of cold in the Sierra Nevada. A female refugee wrote a friend in uniform to inform him of a woman's death from hunger. Women in Crevillente (Alicante) who had asked the Popular Front mayor for bread were denounced as fascists, and rumors of female food riots in Madrid circulated. Toward the end of the war, the social divisions in many villages were reduced to two categories: those who had food and those who did not. Although black marketeering demoralized the Republican front and rear, those with access to it were fortunate; in certain villages, profiteering disappeared since nothing was for sale.¹⁷

Soldiers in Andalusia wondered why so little olive oil reached the front. If they suspected that peasants were hiding their stashes or exporting them clandestinely to other provinces, they were correct. By horse, car, truck, and train, small and large quantities of oil were moved secretly from the province of Jaen to other areas of the Republic where they were traded for needed commodities. Authorities were unable to calculate precisely the amount, but they were certain that it was considerable. Olive growers and olive oil producers-like others who sold on the market-did not accurately report the amounts to authorities. Officials recognized "the mania of hiding."¹⁸

The shortage of oil was further aggravated by the lack of labor mass conscription had caused. Labor shortages and an inability to feed available wage earners halved the normal output of harvesting. Disorganization of distribution further exacerbated scarcities. Quartermasters did not recycle containers quickly enough for oil to be allocated efficiently. Road transportation, especially trucks, was overemployed, and railroads were underused even though the latter were more

¹⁴ See reports of November 1937, AHN-SGC, Aragon R 1; Informe, 11 September 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 71,1. 1091, c. 13.

¹⁵ Jose Manuel Martinez Bande, *La lucha en torno a Madrid en el invierno de 1936-1937* (Madrid, 1984), 114; Jose Manuel Martinez Bande, *Nueve meses de guerra en el Norte* (Madrid, 1980), 142; Pons Prades, *Un soldado de la Republica*, 241; Gabriel Jackson, *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War, 1931-1939* (Princeton, 1965), 266.

¹⁶ See fichas de censura, September-December 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 66,1. 803, c. 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Informe, Delegacion de Jaen, 31 August 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 67,1. 850, c. 6.

efficient and cheaper than the former. Nationalist propaganda used the enemy's material deficiencies to demoralize Republican forces. As Nationalist soldiers went on leave, they vocally flaunted their good fortune and derided their Republican counterparts for rotting in the trenches.¹⁹

Sickness and disease were far more dangerous enemies than Nationalists. For every battle injury, there were four, five, or six who had to be discharged or hospitalized because of illness. In comparison, Nationalist ratios of sick to injured were two or three to one. In addition to the flu and other common illnesses, malaria and sarna (scabies) were rampant on Republican fronts. The latter was aggravated by the lack of soap; at times, Republican soldiers received no more than a bar per month. To the numbers of the sick should be added a smaller number of those who injured themselves, usually inflicting a light gunshot wound on their hands or feet to obtain a discharge. Madrid Hospital 14 (Calle de la Puebla) reported so many self-mutilations in the left hand or arm that health care personnel assumed that any injuries in these body parts were self-inflicted. On a quiet sector near Lerida in September 1937, commissars recommended public shaming and severe punishment, including death sentences, for automutilados. Even on more active fronts, the numbers of the ill outweighed those who were killed or wounded by at least two to one. Low quality food and inadequate shelter increased the numbers of sick and exhausted soldiers. In certain battalions serving near Brihuega (Guadalajara), disorders of the digestive tract and fatigue may have touched almost one-quarter of the men. Under these circumstances, commanders worried about the overly defensive proclivities of their troops, reasoning that only armies that attack win wars.²⁰

With material conditions equally bad or worse, calm prevailed on the Mediana-Quinto-Azaila sector of the Aragon front. The organizational difficulties of feeding and clothing the Popular Army depressed even political delegates who assisted the commissars of the 44th Division. In the fall of 1937, acute rheumatism caused by damp living and sleeping conditions, intestinal problems brought on by bad food, and colds were the most serious health problems. Only eight doctors, instead of the required 21, served the entire division. By the middle of winter, the situation had deteriorated even further, as few possessed coats or even blankets. Parasites—especially fleas and lice—disregarded rank and infested nearly every man in uniform. Washing was difficult because of lack of soap and clean water, and even when these were available, it was impossible to eliminate parasites and cure skin disorders since men could not change or disinfect underwear.²¹

In the winter of 1937, over half the casualties in the 143d Brigade and in other units were caused by illness. In some units the majority of soldiers had scabies or other dermatological sicknesses. Another skin disease, which affected 40 percent of personnel in the First and Third Battalions, could not be identified and therefore could not be treated. Typhus was spreading from the contaminated water of the Ebro River, but men were too weak to receive the recommended vaccination, which produced a dangerously high fever. Scarcities of fresh fruits and vegetables containing vitamins B and C increased threats of gingivitis and stomach disorders. With body defenses weak, minor cuts and injuries developed into serious infections. At the end of the year,

¹⁹ Consecuencia, 23 December 1937, AHN-SGC, Aragon R 1.

²⁰ 43 Brigada Mixta, September 1937, SHM, ZR, a. 75,1. 1196, c. 10; Estado, May 1938[?], SHM, ZN, a. 27,1. 23 bis, c. 13; Informacion, 9 January 1938, SHM, ZN, a. 42,1. 2, c. 2; Informe, 19 March 1937, SHM, ZR, reel 45; Comisariado, 29 September 1937, AHN-SGC, Vinaroz 5/15; Normas, 11 June 1937, SHM, ZR, a. 69,1. 1035, c. 13; Informe, 3-11 June 1937, SHM, ZR, a. 70,1. 1074, c. 12; Actividades, 4 June 1937, SHM, ZR, a. 70,1. 1074, c. 12.

²¹ Ejercito, 28 November 1937, AHN-SGC, Aragon R 1; Copia, 14 November 1937, AHN-SGC, Aragon R 1; Informe, 23 November 1937, AHN-SGC, Aragon R 1; Estado, 23 December 1937, AHNSGC, Aragon R 1.

men of the 145th Brigade did not repeat the aggressive attacks against the enemy and consequent heroic deaths that had occurred in September and October. Instead, they disobeyed their officers and fraternized with the enemy.²²

Despite their large numbers of impoverished proletarians, whom many leftists had thought would provide a militant or even revolutionary base for the Republic, Andalusia and Extremadura became a locus of quiet and even friendly fronts until the end of the war. For example, in 1937 the 21st Division, composed of three mixed brigades (76th, 79th, and 80th) which were stationed around Granada, engaged in only "a few small operations and raids."²³ Throughout 1937, the 21st managed to capture or injure only several dozen Nationalists. The division lost even fewer troops. In certain sectors of the Andalusian front near Ugijar (Granada), enemies were on amiable terms, with "numerous" Republican and Nationalist soldiers exchanging newspapers, tobacco, and information. "Comrades" from both sides sang songs, awarded each other nicknames, and circulated news of mutual friends.²⁴ Raids and battles may have interrupted but did not destroy the calm. Soldiers were accused of wasting munitions to ritualize artillery exchanges, firing weapons to promote the appearance of war because so many on each side were unwilling to engage in truly offensive behavior. Whether by design or, much more frequently, by accident or technical incompetence, Republican shells often failed to explode, further contributing to an atmosphere of tranquillity.²⁵

Some failures were due to carelessness and incompetence; others were caused by deliberate sabotage. In Pozuelo (Madrid), a message in one Nationalist shell that failed to explode read, "Surprise! Comrades, ... don't worry. These won't explode. We are with you. UHP (Union Hermanos Proletarios)."²⁶ After the Battle of Guadalajara in March 1937, the center was generally quiet. On the Jarama front, Republicans and Nationalists fired 12,000 rounds at each other without producing a single injury. To end ritualization, save munitions, and avoid wear and tear on weapons, the battalion commander recommended not responding to enemy fire unless the target was in full view and within range. In Andalusia at the end of 1937 and the beginning of 1938, artillery engagements did little damage. In Baza (Granada), Nationalist guns fired 30 shells, only five of which exploded, causing no damage. Again, the failure to injure was not entirely accidental. In one unexploded shell Republicans found the following message: "This is a joke since it is the Day of the Virgin."²⁷ Generalissimo Franco himself noted that "[t]he huge consumption of munitions by our armies, including those on quiet fronts and sectors where there are no attacks, compels us to remember the great importance of saving ammunition." He worried that "excessive use" would produce a shortage.²⁸

In Andalusia, a misunderstanding between the two sides occurred when the Republican Army fired on enemy lines to celebrate its capture of Teruel, and the Nationalists interpreted the bar-

²² Sanidad, 22 November 1937, AHN-SGC, Aragon R 1; Acta, 18 December 1937, AHN-SGC, Aragon R 1; Acta, 9 October 1937, AHN-SGC, Aragon R 1.

²³ 21 Division, 31 December 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 71,1. 1090, c. 10.

²⁴ Informacion, 17 August 1937, SHM, ZR, a. 71,1. 1092, c. 11; see also Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare 1914-1918* (New York, 1980).

²⁵ Estado, 13 October 1937, SHM, CGG, a. 5,1. 285, c. 26; Jefe, 16 March 1937, and Informe, 24 March 1937, SHM, ZR, a. 69,1. 1045, c. 16.

²⁶ En la informacion, 15 January 1937, CGG, a. 5,1. 285, c. 26.

²⁷ Ejercito de Andalucia, 8 December 1937, SHM, ZR, reel 76; El Jefe, 13 and 14 December 1937, SHM, ZR, a. 73,1. 1154, c. 21; Telegrama, 11 December 1937, SHM, ZR, reel 76.

²⁸ Telegrama, 26 December 1937, SHM, ZN, a. 16,1. 33, c. 45.

rage erroneously. "Believing they were under attack" they retaliated with rifles, machine guns, mortars, and bombs, but pacific normality returned quickly and enemy fire once again seemed more like harmless target practice.²⁹ Republicans permitted the "fascists" to exercise in the open, a violation of the rules of trench warfare where snipers, machine gunners, mortar men, and common soldiers with hand grenades were supposed to open fire on any visible human target. Malfunctioning weapons on both sides continued to promote tranquillity; in one exchange on New Year's Eve, only 7 of 12 enemy shells exploded, and they caused no damage. Except for an occasional raid or aviation attack in which one-third of the bombs released were duds, little disturbed the calm of the New Year. On 18 January, only 14 of 56 Nationalist artillery shells exploded, and those that did work caused few injuries. Again, on 26 January half of enemy shells were inoperative. The calm was finally broken in the middle of February by a series of Republican raids which provoked angry Nationalist counterattacks.³⁰

Throughout 1937, in a number of sectors of the Aragon front Republican authorities asserted that "the enemy has tried to fraternize with our forces" and "organize something like an armistice."³¹ Informal truces were arranged under the pretext of recovering corpses. Certain groups conscripted into the Nationalist army were particularly receptive to truces and nonintervention agreements. On the Aragon front, the 105th Division of the Nationalist Army was wracked by desertions. In September 1937, an officer attributed them to "extremism" or in Nationalist parlance leftist ideology of any sort, and he called for a "purge of leftists" and greater surveillance of all soldiers.³² Desertions continued in November, and officials planned reprisals against deserters' families.³³

By early 1938, senior officers concluded that the problem was as much regional as political. The 105th was loaded with recruits from coastal areas of Galicia who had little desire to sacrifice for their fellow Gallegan, Francisco Franco. General Yague, one of the most capable Falangist officers, felt that the strong Gallegan presence in the 105th made it useless. Divisional officers asked Burgos for "180 Falangist volunteers ready to carry out a special mission" to be dispersed among 12 battalions of the Army of the North to prevent desertions. Generalissimo Franco decided to send 1,200 men, none of them Gallegans, "to clean out" (sanear) the division.³⁴ Many Gallegans would end up in labor battalions. But while the Gallegans achieved fame or notoriety for their desertions, they were not the only group reluctant to serve the Nationalist cause. In October 1937, in response to "the growing number of seventeen year olds who are emigrating to America," the Generalissimo himself—like Communist dictators that he purportedly detested—prohibited all males 16 or older from leaving the country.³⁵

The Army of Extremadura provides the best—or the worst, from a militant perspective—example of fraternization. In certain sectors near Castuera (Badajoz) in the rich Serena Valley, fraternization was common and even "habitual."³⁶ What was unusual in this case was that the

²⁹ Telegramas, December 1937-February 1938, SHM, ZR, reel 76.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Circular, 7 October 1937, AHN-SGC, Vinaroz 5/15.

³² Resuelto, 22 September 1937, SHM, ZN, a. 37,1. 1, c. 11.

³³ El Teniente-Coronel, 14 November 1937, SHM, ZN, a. 37,1. 1, c. 1; Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War* (New York, 1986), 284.

³⁴ Primera, 17 February 1938, SHM, ZN, a. 37,1. 1, c. 3; General, 27 February 1938, SHM, ZN, a. 37, 1. 1, c. 3.

³⁵ S.E., 23 October 1937, SHM, ZN, a. 37,1. 1, c.1.

³⁶ Ejercito de Extremadura, 22 August 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 54,1. 473, c. 7; Informe, 10 July 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 54,1. 474, c. 5.

fraternizers were from supposedly elite forces. Republican Assault Guards of the Twelfth Brigade, which totaled 1,400 men, made frequent contact with Falangists and a requete. The usual trading of tobacco and newspapers occurred among small groups of a dozen soldiers. They called each other comrades, gave each other affectionate nicknames (rojillos, el Madrilena, Gil el Espartero), and consumed alcoholic beverages together. A Falangist alférez (provisional lieutenant) even proposed a group photo, but prudent Assault Guards politely declined. Republican officers wanted to end fraternization because it demonstrated insufficient antifascism. They also feared that it would encourage desertions and reveal significant information to the enemy. The Assault Guards had been used as shock troops, but apparently a long stay on the Extremadura front had dwindled their fighting spirit. The Twelfth's habits of trading and conversing with the enemy, consorting with females, and taking unauthorized leave set a bad example for neighboring units. Soldiers charged repeatedly that the Twelfth had become a Communist fiefdom where the uncommitted and even known rightists found a safe haven. At the beginning of April, 60 Assault Guards had deserted to the enemy, and an implicit nonintervention agreement with the Nationalists encouraged others to abandon the lines. "Prolonged inactivity" in "a majority of sectors" produced immobility.³⁷

In his report on the collapse of the Popular Army of Extremadura, General Asensio Torrado confirmed charges that fraternization of the Twelfth Brigade had revealed enough information to permit the enemy a successful attack. Nationalists had profited by advancing through the Twelfth's sector, which quickly collapsed in "disorderly retreat."³⁸ The failure of the Army of Extremadura gave Franco control of one of the wealthiest agricultural regions and allowed him to put more pressure on Republican forces on eastern fronts. It also created obstacles for the Republican offensive—much discussed throughout the entire war—to capture Badajoz and cut off the Nationalists from their Portuguese allies. Thus, in Extremadura, quiet fronts did not signify an informal agreement recognizing an equal balance of force or a basic commitment to one's country or cause, as they had in the First World War. During that conflict, nonaggressive soldiers still refused to permit the enemy to occupy their trenches. In contrast, the Extremaduran variety of live and let live allowed individuals or small groups of Republican soldiers to avoid danger and save their own skins.

Disregarding repeated orders, threats of punishment, and actual arrests, Andalusian troops frequently fraternized with the enemy near the end of the war. Low-ranking soldiers arranged truces in which each side agreed not to fire on the other. Soldiers who broke the peace were made to drink wine in no man's land in full view and in close range of both sides. To cement the unwritten accord, men embraced and exchanged newspapers, cigarettes, and coins. One Republican unit got on very well with its "neighbors," who occasionally supplied it with quantities of tobacco. Indeed, one of its soldiers wanted to mail a cigarette to a friend but feared that "lazy censors" would steal it. Conversing with "fascists" broke up the awful monotony of trench existence and was the chief amusement of the day. On at least one occasion, the reputed enemies hunted partridges to supplement their meager food supply. Most officers seemed unaware of the unwritten arrangements, but some, especially lieutenants, were complicit.³⁹

³⁷ Informe, 19 August 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 54,1. 473, c. 8; Reconocimientos, 2-7 July 1938, ZR, a. 54,1. 473, c. 8; PSOE, 9 June 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 54,1. 474-1, c. 2; Ordenes, 4 August 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 54,1. 474-1, c. 2; Informe, 19 August 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 54, I. 473, c. 8.

³⁸ Ordenes, 4 August 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 54, I. 474-1, c. 2.

³⁹ Fichas de censura, September-October 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 66,1. 798, c. 1.

Letters from the front at the end of 1938 reveal, above all, the desire for the war to end immediately and unconditionally. Individual soldiers wanted to return home. Soldiers stationed in the province of Jaen had good reason not to fear the Nationalists with whom they conversed frequently. One wrote home to ask for goods that he could trade with his buddies "in the fascist zone."⁴⁰ Exchanges between Republican and Nationalist troops involved more than trading goods and constituted peace offerings which discouraged hostilities. When newly arrived Republican soldiers who had been sent to relieve frontliners began to fire at the enemy, the Nationalists responded by telling them, "Reds, don't shoot. It's not our fault."⁴¹ This pacific initiative led to affectionate embraces, with men promising each other that the front would remain calm and that the other side would be warned if officers ordered an attack. Every morning, enemies shared cigarettes and news. As a result, a soldier from a local village was thrilled to learn how his friends and acquaintances in the Nationalist zone were faring. Partying and singing transpired at night.⁴²

Overworked and understaffed censors, whose job it was to read tens of thousands of letters, deplored the "poor combative spirit" of the men, most of whom were conscripts from Catalonia and Valencia.⁴³ Hundreds tried to deceive censors by writing on the inside of envelopes or below the stamp. One soldier confessed that although he hated fascism "because it reeked of militarism" he hated war even more.⁴⁴ Milicianos of the first hour admitted their disillusionment and wished only that the war would end immediately. The well-known defeatism of Manuel Azana, president of the Republic, found more favor among the troops than the last-ditch resistance policy of Juan Negrin, the prime minister. One opined that those such as Negrin who said "resist" had never been hungry. Negrin's famous girth did not lend credibility to his calls for sacrifice, and soon he became known as "Mr. Lentils."⁴⁵ A self-admitted cynic from Murcia, where draftees were hiding from the enemy with the complicity of the population, believed that volunteering to fight was the stupidest possible action. An unknown prophet made the nearly correct prediction that the war would be over by March. A general defeatism or indifference to the fate of the Republic pervaded the soldiers' letters. In addition, contact between Catalans and Andalusians provoked regionalist tensions in Baena (Cordoba). The former felt a special antipathy for the latter, who in turn resented what they considered Catalan arrogance and superior airs.⁴⁶

In the Army of Extremadura, desertions were rampant. Certain brigades such as the 86th and 104th were particularly affected. The 114th Mixed Brigade was so touched that fascist cells and organizations were suspected of organizing evasions. From its very beginning, the 113th Brigade had also suffered "a high percentage of desertions towards Nationalist lines."⁴⁷ Its soldiers' main goal was "tranquillity and harmony with the enemy" and they conversed constantly with the fascists: "They remained inactive, unaggressive, and unwilling to follow orders. They spent entire months without firing a shot when we had a ten to one advantage in troops. They were completely

⁴⁰ Fichas de censura, December[?] 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 66, c. 803, c. 5.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ministerio, 7 January 1939, SHM, ZR, a. 66,1. 803, c. 5.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Pons Prades, *Un soldado de la Republica*, 351.

⁴⁶ Ministerio, 7 January 1939, SHM, ZR, a. 66, 1. 803, c. 5.

⁴⁷ Informe, Tribunal Permanente, 20 August 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 54,1.473, c. 8; Asunto, 19 August 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 54, 1. 475, c. 8; Informe, 19 August 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 54, 1. 473, c. 8; VII Cuerpos, 12 December 1937, SHM, ZR, a. 76,1. 1235, c. 1.

apathetic,” wrote the chief investigator.⁴⁸ Some members of the 114th who had fraternized with the enemy were imprisoned. The number of self-inflicted wounds was high enough to make any injury suspect, and as a result, soldiers occasionally were thrown into military prisons without proof of deliberate self-mutilation.⁴⁹

In Andalusia, desertions on both sides encouraged calm and sapped the aggressive urge. The overwhelming majority of Republican troops there seemed at least nominally committed to the Popular Front since most were peasants who had joined either the UGT or CNT. By May 1938, however, Republicans were deserting twice as fast as their Nationalist counterparts. During that month, 57 Republican soldiers fled to the Nationalists, whereas only 20 Nationalists escaped to the Republicans. In June, 56 ran to the Nationalists, and 32 Nationalist soldiers journeyed to the other side. Sometimes, though, the flux was reversed; the 9th Corps of the Army of Andalusia reported losing 290 to the Nationalists and gaining 375 enemy deserters in return. According to one report, the 9th captured fewer than a half dozen prisoners throughout the entire year, indicating that live and let live characterized its front. The above figures show the difficulty of making broad statistical comparisons of Nationalist and Republican desertions. The Nationalist officer and historian Ramon Salas gives figures of five Republican desertions for each Nationalist in his highly regarded *Ejercito Popular*, but it is not clear how, where, and when this ratio has been calculated. The prudent conclusion is that desertions on quiet fronts created problems for both armies.⁵⁰

In the Sierra north of Madrid, where the front was “excessively tranquil” from October to December 1938, 27 soldiers of the 26th Mixed Brigade tried to desert. Eight of them were shot fleeing to the enemy. Recent draftees—especially more mature (33-35 years old) soldiers who had wives and children—were “cautious, timid, and don’t wish to fight.”⁵¹ They had many reasons to dislike military service, but one of them was the pay cut most older wage earners were forced to accept when drafted. More so than younger soldiers, they refused to take risks and were motivated solely by fear, which then spread to other troops. The total inactivity on this front, “where the war went unnoticed” reinforced desire to avoid combat. The few soldiers who did wish to fight wanted to participate in the battle of Catalonia on the eastern front; 235 men, many of whom were Catalan, volunteered. The “immense majority” however, had no combat experience and did not wish to acquire any. They were content just to have engineered their way to a tranquil front.⁵²

Retarded paydays and purported unfairness of leave added to grievances. Pay was as much as four months late, preventing soldiers from sending money home to their families or purchasing food or clothing. Hospitalized troops also suffered from late pay, which lowered their morale. Retarded paydays and the decreasing value of the Republican currency made desertions from Nationalist ranks increasingly unattractive. A Moorish deserter from the franquistas became disillusioned in the Popular Army because of the low value of Republican money, and he demanded his salary in silver. On many fronts, paymasters—along with quartermasters—were suspected of corruption.⁵³

⁴⁸ Informe, Tribunal Permanente, 20 August 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 54, 1. 473, c. 8.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ IX Cuerpo, December 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 65, 1. 975, c. 1; Comisariado, SHM, ZR, reel 76; Salas, *Ejercito*, 1580.

⁵¹ See Informes, SHM, ZR, a. 73, 1. 1155, c. 13; Sindicato, 25 September 1937, AHN-SGC, Castellon 139.

⁵² Informe, 3 January 1939, SHM, ZR, a. 73, 1. 1155, c. 13.

⁵³ Acta de acusacion, 24 July 1938, SHM, ZR, reel 45; Nota, 11 October 1938, SHM, ZN, a. 43, 1. 1, c. 17; Orden, 3 November 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 72, 1. 1108, c. 21.

The vocabulary of "us" (low-ranking soldiers) versus "them" (officers) conveyed soldiers' resentment. The sick, the exempt, and nearly anyone who managed to avoid the front lines aroused envy among front-line soldiers of the Popular Army. Censors reported that after food, the privileged who avoided the trenches (emboscados) generated the largest number of complaints. Enchufados—those with cushy jobs in the rear or those who had access to better food or clothing—reminded combatants of *senoritos* (upper-class playboys) and were accordingly labeled fascists. One soldier wrote to a family member that the *enchufados* in Murcia had sabotaged a truck that was about to take them to the front. Another working in the quartermaster's office revealed that his colleagues were warm and well-fed and concluded that war affected above all "poor workers who [were the only ones] to die on the battlefield."⁵⁴

Popular cynicism, which was summarized by the feeling that only the well-connected would survive and prosper, pervaded the front and the rear throughout 1938 and 1939. Some of the disgruntled referred to deserters not as *desertores*, as official terminology labeled them, but rather as *escapados*. Those drafted in 1938 were even more likely to desert than those of 1937. Militants conceded their inability to understand that the 1938 class of draftees—workers who had suffered exploitation "all their lives"—would nonetheless take the first available opportunity to flee to the Nationalists. When devoted Republican soldiers questioned potential deserters why they "wanted to continue to be exploited," they replied opportunistically that the "fascists" were going to win. To prevent desertions, Republican authorities circulated letters showing that Nationalists had confiscated the property of families of "reds." This had little effect, however, and by February desertions had increased even more.⁵⁵

As had occurred in the early days of militias, the construction of fortifications often was neglected. This should have been a top priority despite the difficulties of digging with primitive tools in a hard and rocky terrain. As in the First World War, trench warriors needed protection against the standard practice of launching heavy artillery and aviation attacks before going "over the top." Fortification troops, however, had a mixed record. Some units, composed of unionized workers, were able to convert from union to military discipline and become effective trench builders. Other construction personnel, especially in Aragon and in much of New Castile, were more reluctant to make the change and labored at a slower pace. Commissars at Puebla de Albortón (Zaragoza) were ordered to make sure that sappers worked hard and did not waste time.⁵⁶

Fortification workers in Extremadura were especially tempted to desert. Authorities suggested that 100 loyal anti-fascists who had belonged to Popular Front organizations before 19 July 1936 serve as undercover agents in Extremaduran fortification brigades. Their job was to gather information that could help to halt unauthorized flight. Desertions cost the Popular Army not only men and equipment but valuable time and resources that were devoted to investigations of its own troops. In this case, union workers from the province of Ciudad Real had been quickly drafted into the Army of Extremadura to construct fortifications, but building had been almost entirely neglected even though the front had been quiet for months. The conscripted laborers had assumed they would be working in the rear and were dismayed to find themselves at the

⁵⁴ 78 Brigada Mixta, December [?] 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 66,1. 803, c. 7.

⁵⁵ Ministerio, 10 February 1939, SHM, ZR, a. 66,1. 803, c. 17.

⁵⁶ Informe, 2 December 1937, SHM, ZR, reel 45; II Cuerpo, 5 July 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 70,1. 1051, c. 16; Las operaciones de Teruel, 25 February 1938, SHM, ZR, reel 93; Informe, 25 December 1937, AHN-SGC, Aragon 32; Sexta Brigada, 11 November 1937, AHN-SGC, Vinaroz 5/15.

front without uniforms or shoes, let alone tobacco. Lack of transport also lowered output, and in certain cases the scarcity of tools, especially dynamite to mine the rocky terrain.⁵⁷

Commissars who attempted to get their men to perform became highly unpopular. Soldiers regarded them as spoilsports and naggers who were responsible for many wartime difficulties, especially lack of food and clothing. Throughout the war in various units, officers and men ganged up against conscientious commissars to keep them from training and indoctrinating their charges. Quiet fronts also experienced tensions between commissars and regular officers. The former, who were stationed near Arganda (Madrid), complained about the incompetence and corruption of the latter, referring disparagingly to officers as the "Junta de Burgos," a powerful group of Nationalist leaders.⁵⁸ Commissars believed that professional military men were lazy, that "with only very few exceptions" officers were merely geographically loyal to the Republic and were really indifferent to its fate. They permitted their troops, the majority of whom "lacked [class] consciousness and combative spirit" to do nothing.⁵⁹

Even with supplies, many units "worked badly" and were "depressed." The commanding officer of the 52nd Battalion of Fortifications was said to be more interested in his pay than anything else. Commissars charged that he was not a true antifascist. Many of his men, who had been assigned to gather the harvest with remaining peasants, had "returned discreetly to their homes." Not being paid demoralized them, especially when they compared their situation to the steady income of Nationalist soldiers. They complained that they were abused and threatened by certain officers.⁶⁰ The transfer of an infamous captain to a new company provoked the desertions of most (172) of its soldiers. Attempts to limit flight by posting guards sometimes failed since the guards themselves were unreliable, and the number of deserters overwhelmed the resources of local authorities. In the summer of 1938, encouraged by the long and loosely guarded front, nearly 700 of these largely illiterate and "politically uneducated" union workers deserted to the rear. The military consequence of this massive alienation was inadequate fortifications. Sorely needed was a second line of trenches. These deficiencies facilitated the Nationalist offensive and made it surprisingly rapid.⁶¹

An examination of quiet fronts "from below" reveals problems of the Republican war effort that have received little attention from historians. A materialist approach from the bottom up shows that the Republic could not satisfy basic physical needs of its troops. Soldiers' experiences of hunger, cold, and disease on tranquil fronts undermined their desire to continue the war, and protecting their own bodies came to have the highest priority. The inability of the Popular Army to fulfill material necessities also deepened skepticism about Republican ideology. Opportunism and cynicism flourished in the Republican zone, and these attitudes made it difficult for commanders to use soldiers to attack or put pressure on the enemy. Nor could they easily withdraw their best reserves from quiet fronts for fear of collapse. Self-preservation helped to generate a national war of attrition. As the war continued, soldiers of the Popular Army lost any remaining desire to sacrifice for the Republic or, for that matter, any abstract political or revolutionary

⁵⁷ Documento 117, 17 August 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 54,1. 473, c. 7; Copia, nd [April? 1938], SHM, ZR, a. 54,1. 473, c. 7; Comisario, 10 July 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 54,1. 473, c. 8.

⁵⁸ Director, 2 May 1938, SHM, ZR, reel 45; Camarada, 27 January 1938, SHM, ZR, reel 45; Acta, 18 August 1938, SHM, ZR, reel 45.

⁵⁹ Informe, 8 June 1938, SHM, ZR, reel 45.

⁶⁰ Declaracion prestada por el prisionero, 26 August 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 54,1. 473, c. 8.

⁶¹ Ordenes, 4 August 1938, SHM, ZR, a. 54,1. 474-1, c. 2.

cause. They would not, as Republican leaders hoped, make a contribution to a decisive battle or battles which could turn the tide.

Soldiers found that many of the enemy shared their dislike of war and would cooperate in arranging informal and unwritten truces. Yet Nationalists were more consistently able to overcome rank-and-file passivity and create a more effective fighting force. Franquistas fed, clothed, and paid their troops much more regularly than Republicans. Nationalists persistently demonstrated the effectiveness of professional soldiers and mercenaries and thereby revealed the inability of the Popular Army to match the feats of the French revolutionary armies which had been able to vanquish the forces of the old regime. Also, unlike the Russian Whites, who in their civil war confronted a leftist enemy with political and social goals similar to Spanish Republicans, Spanish Nationalists could rely upon a competent officer class which, in contrast to its Russian counterpart, had not been decimated by a world war. Spain's neutrality during the Great War proved to be one of the most astute policies ever undertaken by Spain's governing elites and may have prevented that nation from following a form of the Soviet model. Furthermore, neither property-tied nor clerical elites in Spain had suffered the disruptions of World War I. In 1936, much of the army, Church, and the state were largely intact and ready for battle against the left.⁶²

A study of quiet fronts reveals that nonideological Spaniards—who are often said to be product of franquista economic growth and the consumer society of the late 1950s and 1960s—were alive, but perhaps not well, during the civil war. The Second Republic may have been a period of relative mass mobilization, but the overwhelming majority maintained a tenuous commitment to political and social causes. The mass of individuals were primarily concerned with their own survival. Consumerism of the second half of the twentieth century did not create non-ideological individuals; it inherited them from the 1930s.

⁶² Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (London, 1996), 654.

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