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EMISSARIES from Gen. Francisco Franco met with German leader Adolf Hitler just before midnight on July 26, 1936, part way through the Wagner festival at Bayreuth, Germany. Hitler, always stirred by Wagnerian opera, was in a buoyant mood after a performance of “Siegfried” when he received the visitors that night.

Franco, leader of the rebel faction—called the Nationalists—in the Spanish civil war needed Hitler’s help. The best of Franco’s forces were in Spanish Morocco and he wanted German aircraft to fly them to the fighting front in Spain. Hermann Goering, chief of the Luftwaffe, was in Bayreuth that night and opposed such involvement, but when the ebullient Hitler said yes, Goering switched to enthusiasm for the project.

Franco’s request was for 10 transport aircraft plus infantry weapons and anti-aircraft guns. Hitler gave him more than he asked for, sending 20 Lufthansa Ju 52 airliners—repainted to disguise their origin—and six He 51 biplane fighters.

It was the first big military airlift in history. Over the next three months, the Germans flew 13,500 Nationalist troops

to bases in southern Spain. The trimotor Ju 52s were stripped bare inside and the soldiers sat on the floor in back, their rifles between their knees. Each aircraft made as many as four flights a day, carrying up to 40 passengers instead of the official maximum of 17. By October, the Germans had established air superiority over the Strait of Gibraltar and the transfer of men and materiel continued by sea transport.

That was only the beginning of German assistance, which culminated in the deployment of the Condor Legion and the rotation of Luftwaffe aircrews through the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939, serving as a dress rehearsal for blitzkrieg in World War II.

The popular assumption is that Germany was drawn into Spain by the opportunity for testing and training for the Luftwaffe, but that was secondary. Hitler’s real reasons were strategic. The Condor Legion supported a fascist takeover of Spain, established a military challenge on the flank of France, opened access to seaports on the Atlantic, and distracted Europe from Germany’s own preparations for war.

Franco and the Nationalists are often remembered as the villains. In actuality, it was a brutal war with atrocities common on both sides. However, intellectuals, authors, and journalists from all over the world flocked to the cause of Franco’s opponents, called the Republicans or the Popular Front, who finally lost after a three-year struggle.

“The Spanish civil war remains one of the few modern conflicts whose history had been written more effectively by the losers than by the winners,” said historian Antony Beevor.

In the 1930s, a loose coalition of Communists, Socialists, and anarchists, supported by labor unions and tenant farmers, gained control of Spain, traditionally a monarchy in which conservatives, large landowners, the military, and the Catholic Church had been dominant. The coalition soon moved into the orbit of the Soviet Union.

The civil war began in July 1936 when senior army officers in cooperation with the fascist Falange party and other groups rose in revolt against the left-wing government of the new republic. They called on Franco, the most decorated officer in

THE CONDOR LEGION

By John T. Correll

In the Spanish Civil War, the Luftwaffe practiced for World War II.

the Spanish Army, to lead the revolution. The Popular Front had posted Franco to a command in the Canary Islands to keep him out of the way, but he flew to Spanish Morocco to take charge of the Army of Africa, 30,000 strong. It included the Spanish Foreign Legion, regarded as Spain's best troops, and other experienced units.

The armed forces were divided, with part of the army and most of the navy remaining loyal to the government. In all, counting the frontier guards and national police, the Nationalist forces had about 130,000 men, compared to 50,000 for the Republicans. The Republicans kept most of the military aircraft, but they were obsolete and essentially worthless. Both sides had large political militias.

Above left: German Chancellor Adolf Hitler, flanked by Maj. Gen. Wolfram von Richthofen, the last commander of the Condor Legion, salutes German troops as they return to Berlin after bolstering fascist dictator Gen. Francisco Franco's troops in Spain. Right: Ju 87s such as these flew their first operational missions with the Condor Legion in 1938.

Some 32,000 ideologues from 54 countries joined the International Brigades, organized from Moscow by the Comintern, the international arm of the Communist Party. About 2,400 volunteers from the United States went to Spain with the Abraham Lincoln Battalion. The Popular Front also hired foreign mercenary pilots, but unlike the politically motivated International Brigades, the mercenaries

National Archives photo



were attracted by a salary of \$1,500 a month plus a \$1,000 bonus for every Nationalist aircraft shot down.

History and literature have romanticized the Republicans. The leading example is Ernest Hemingway's novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, published in 1940 and celebrating the service of a young American in the International Brigades. Hemingway held court for writers and war correspondents at the Hotel Florida in Madrid and spent time with the Republican Army in the field. He used Robert Merriman, commander of the Lincoln Battalion, as the prototype for his fictional hero, Robert Jordan.

The Condor Legion lived up to its reputation for wanton slaughter, but moral high ground was hard to find in the conflict. In his authoritative history of the war, Hugh Thomas estimates the total loss of life at 500,000—of which more than a fourth were murders and executions, 75,000 of them by the Nationalists and 55,000 by the Republicans. The offenses committed by the Nationalists are better known, but even the supporters of the Republicans recoiled from their vendetta against Catholics, who were identified with the right wing and opposed to social reform. In the summer of 1936 alone, 13 bishops, 4,184 priests, and 283 nuns were hunted down and killed.

Imported Airpower

Most foreign nations followed a policy of nonintervention. In the United States, the Neutrality Act of 1935 made it illegal to sell or transport arms to belligerents. In January 1937 Congress specifically prohibited shipment of arms to Spain by a vote of 81-to-zero in the Senate and 406-to-one in the House. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a fervent admirer of the Popular Front, tried without suc-



Image via Wikipedia

man aircraft. Many Luftwaffe records were lost or destroyed during World War II, but the best estimate is that Germany deployed about 800 aircraft of all types, including trainers and liaison aircraft, to Spain.

Concurrent with the airlift in July, the Luftwaffe dispatched six He 51 fighters to Spain to protect the air transport force. The German pilots were forbidden to fly operational missions other than escort for the airlifters, but after the poorly trained Spanish pilots crashed three of the airplanes, the Germans took over the flying. The three remaining He 51s engaged the hodgepodge Republican air force in late August and shot down the old Breguets and Nieuports with ease.

The June 1939 issue of The Eagle, Germany's Air Ministry-published magazine, blared, "Condor Legion to the Front!" and was subtitled, "German volunteers fought for Spain."

cess to persuade her husband to get the embargo lifted.

Three nations were direct participants: the Soviet Union on the side of the Republicans, and Germany and Italy in aid of the Nationalists. Their most significant contributions were airpower. The USSR provided pilots and about 1,000 airplanes. Italy sent more than 600 airplanes and a substantial ground force. Various totals are given for Ger-

The Ju 52 transports were reconfigured and pressed into service as bombers.

The Nationalists quickly gained control of a third of Spain, holding all of the northwest except for the Basque provinces along the Bay of Biscay. The government held most of the south and east, and the capital at Madrid in the middle of the country.

The situation changed with the arrival of top-quality fighters and experienced

pilots from the USSR. The Polikarpov I-15 biplane and I-16 monoplane were superior to the He 51s and on a par with the agile Italian Fiat CR.2s. The Russian airmen gave their best performance in March 1937 when their fighters and Tupolev SB-2 bombers wreaked havoc on an Italian army corps strung out on the road near Guadalajara. "It was the first time in history that airpower had stopped a major ground offensive," said Carl Posey in *Air & Space* magazine.

The Republican advantage in the air did not last long, though. The Luftwaffe had already decided to withdraw first-line fighters and bombers from units at home and send some of its best combat aircraft to Spain.

The Only Condor in Spain

In October 1936, three months into the war, the Germans upgraded their involvement to the Condor Legion, a composite force named for the great bird of the Andes. There were no condors in Spain, but the linkage carried over in the German mind from South America where Lufthansa operated a subsidiary airline, Sindicato Condor. The force in Spain was designated a legion to preserve the fiction that its members were volunteers.

The Legion consisted of a bomber group and a fighter group, plus reconnaissance, anti-aircraft, and support units, and a ground component with tanks and anti-tank weapons. Elements of the German Navy functioned separately. The Condor Legion operated under German tactical command subject to strategic direction from Franco.

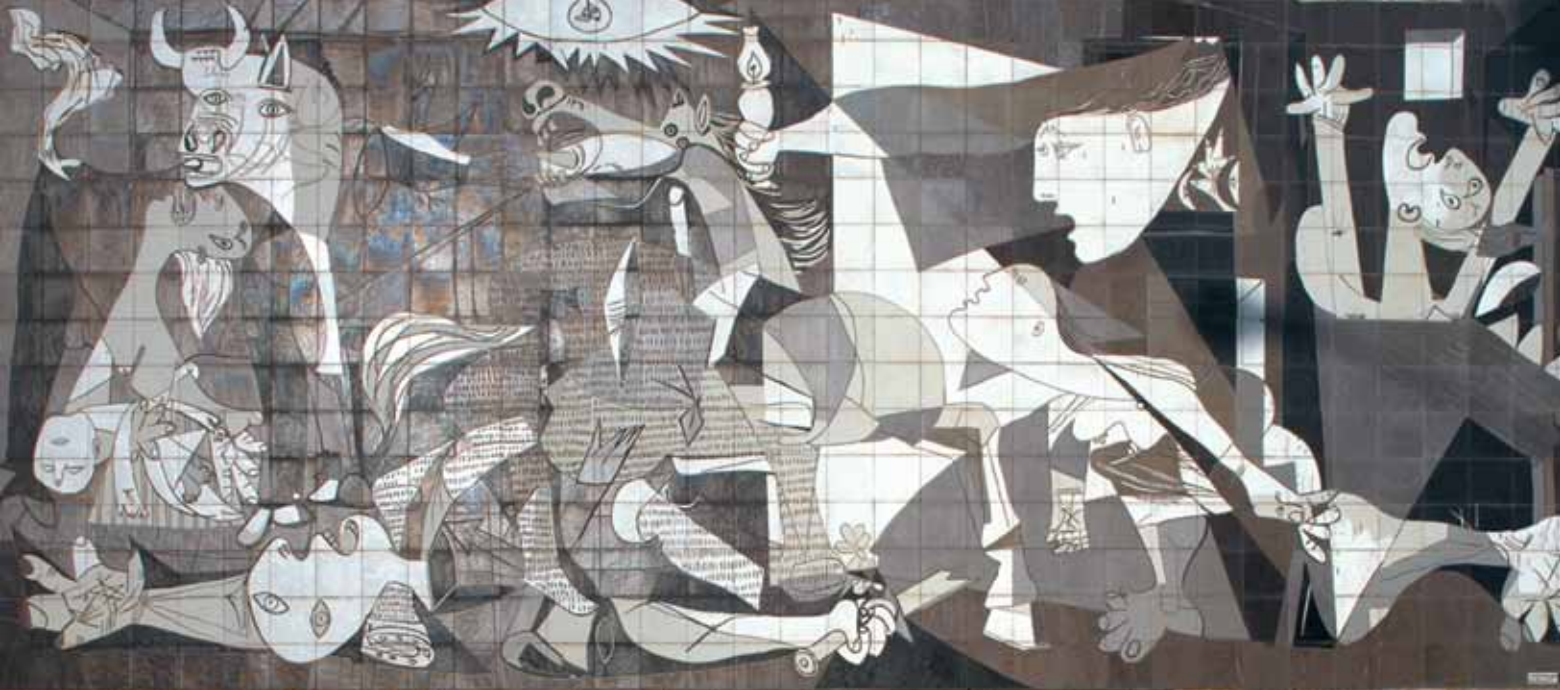
The commander was always a Luftwaffe general. The first of them was Maj. Gen. Hugo Sperrle, who looked like a Nazi from central casting, complete with monocle. In fact, he was a good officer who worked well with his Spanish allies.

Following the cover story, Condor members were discharged from the Luftwaffe and joined the Nationalist forces. They wore Spanish khaki-brown uniforms with Nationalist rank insignia. Their aircraft went to war with Nationalist markings—a stylized St. Andrew's cross on the rudder and the same device reversed out of black roundels on the



Deutsches Museum photo from Architects of Air Power

Spanish Moroccan infantrymen gather at an airfield in Tetuan, Morocco, to be flown to Seville by a German Ju 52 transport. The workhorse aircraft, loaned to Franco from Hitler, carried as many as 40 troops to the front, despite its official maximum capacity of 17.



"GUERNICA" GERNIKARA

Image via Wikimedia Commons

Pablo Picasso's iconic painting depicting the destruction by the Condor Legion of the Basque town of Guernica was sent on a world tour to rally support for the Republican cause in Spain.

wings. They served nine- to 12-month tours before returning to their units at home and, while in Spain, held spot promotions one grade above their regular rank in the Luftwaffe.

Strength of the Condor Legion seldom exceeded 100 aircraft and 6,000 men, including support staff. In all, about 19,000 German military members gained wartime experience in Spain, rotating through the Condor Legion and other units.

Better aircraft were coming, but replacement took time so the Condor Legion had to make do with the He 51s and the converted Ju 52 bombers through 1936 and into 1937.

The He 51 continued to have some success in the fighter role because of the skill of the Luftwaffe pilots, but it was increasingly relegated to ground attack missions. The Ju 52 was regarded as past its effectiveness as a bomber. However, it was these two aircraft that were responsible for the devastation of Guernica in the most notorious event of the Spanish civil war.

The Destruction of Guernica

In April 1937, the Nationalists were rolling up the last pockets of Republican resistance in northwestern Spain. Twenty-three Basque battalions were retreating westward toward the provincial capital at Bilbao, and the little hill town of Guernica—which had great

historical and cultural significance to the Basques—lay across their line of retreat. The two main escape routes intersected there.

In the late afternoon of April 26, 1937, a single He 111 flew over and bombed the town center, probing for possible air defenses. There were none and 15 minutes later, Condor Legion He 51s bombed and strafed Guernica. They were followed by the Ju 52s, attacking in line-abreast formation and carpet bombing the town in relays for two-and-a-half hours with anti-personnel and incendiary munitions. Three-quarters of the buildings in Guernica were destroyed.

From there, Guernica passed into legend. The Republicans and their supporters described it as terror bombing of a defenseless town with no military significance. The popular claim, still repeated today, was that half of the people living there were casualties, 1,654 killed and 889 wounded. The actual death toll was between 200 and 300.

The Popular Front commissioned a painting by Pablo Picasso. "Guernica," a mural-size oil painting in stark grey, black, and white, is one of his most famous works, showing people, animals, and buildings in the throes of bombardment. Its exhibition on a world tour later in 1937 rallied support for the Republican cause.

The Condor Legion attempted briefly to claim that the Basques themselves had

set fire to Guernica, but nobody believed it. The Germans showed no particular regret for the casualties. Bilbao surrendered June 19 and the Nationalists consolidated their control in the north and west. Disagreement continues about whether Franco knew of or approved plans for the bombing.

Exaggerated reports about Guernica worked to Hitler's benefit, creating the impression that the Luftwaffe could wipe out a whole city in a few hours. Europe regarded Germany with new fear and respect.

Condor Re-equips and Rebounds

Of the various types of aircraft arriving to re-equip the Condor Legion, three were of special interest and significance: the superb Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter, the He 111 medium bomber, and the fearsome Ju 87 Stuka dive bomber, which showed up late in the war and in limited numbers.

The sleek Bf 109 was the world's most advanced fighter when it was introduced in 1935 and was still good enough a decade later to score more aerial victories than any other aircraft in World War II. The Condor Legion got a few Bf 109s in 1936 but they did not appear in Spain in substantial numbers until the spring of

1937. They drove the Russian I-15s and I-16s from the sky whenever they met.

The He 111, best and fastest of the German bombers, made its combat debut in March 1937. The Luftwaffe had no satisfactory bomb sight, so the success of high-altitude horizontal bombing was limited. However, the Germans were generally satisfied with the He 111's performance and it remained the workhorse of the Luftwaffe bomber force in World War II.

Replacement of the He 51s and Ju 52s proceeded gradually, but in the middle years of the Spanish civil war, they operated alongside the new aircraft. Adolf Galland, who went on to become a leading Luftwaffe ace in World War II, was an He 51 squadron leader in the Condor Legion in 1937-1938. He flew 280 ground attack sorties but got no missions in the Bf 109 and no aerial victories. His claim to fame in Spain was devising a makeshift munition called "flambo." Galland filled a drop tank with a mixture of gasoline and engine oil and strapped it to a 22-pound bomb. Upon impact, the tank burst open and the bomb detonated with a flaming result that was the forerunner of napalm.

The Luftwaffe's solution to bombing accuracy was the Stuka, short for *Sturzkampfflugzeug* or "diving fighting plane." Two biplane Stukas, the He 50G and the Hs 124, were employed early in Spain but they were soon forgotten as the name was attached exclusively to the definitive Stuka, the Ju 87, which flew its first operational mission with the Condor Legion in February 1938.

Diving on its target at an 85-degree angle, the Ju 87 was extremely accurate. The Condor Legion never got more than a handful of them but they flew two to four sorties a day each. Unchallenged by enemy fighters, they were so effective that the Luftwaffe put great emphasis on the Stuka in its future plans and decided that every bomber should have a dive-bombing capability.

Condor Innovations

Resourceful officers of the Condor Legion developed tactics and concepts to get more effectiveness out of the new weapons. The most notable fighter innovations were the work of Capt. Werner Moelders, who succeeded Galland as commander of one of the fighter squadrons as it transitioned to Bf 109s. Moelders would become the leading Condor Legion ace with 14 victories, but his larger contribution was a lasting change to the standard fighter formation.

Previously, fighters flew in a tight three-airplane "V" and, in Moelders' opinion, spent too much of their attention on avoiding collisions. At his instigation, the Condor Legion shifted to a formation called the *Rotte* with a fighter pilot and his wingman flying about 600 feet apart, allowing them to concentrate on the enemy instead of each other. Two *Rotten* combined to form a *Schwarm*.

"When viewed from above, each plane flew in the location of the four fingertips of a horizontally extended hand, palm down, with fingers straight and slightly spread," said aviation writer Walter Musciano. The new formation was adopted around the world as the classic "Finger Four."

The bomber theoretician was Wolfram von Richtofen, who began his flying career with his famous cousin, Manfred von Richtofen, and the Flying Circus in World War I. On his first tour in Spain, he was chief of staff to Sperrle and planner of the attack on Guernica. He returned in November 1938 as a major general and the last commander of the Condor Legion.

Von Richtofen steadily readjusted the Legion's priorities to increased support of the Nationalist army and improved the tactics for ground attack and dive bombing, especially after the presence of the Stuka introduced new possibilities.

It is inaccurate to say, as some have, that in Spain the Luftwaffe discovered close air support and became the instrument of the ground forces. Germany was a continental nation, with no oceans or geographic barriers separating it from its key neighbors. "One major defeat on land might well seal the fate of the Reich before the Luftwaffe could have an impact," said historian Williamson Murray. The importance of the ground war was already recognized.

At the same time, the emerging concept of blitzkrieg led to greater tactical subordination of airpower to the needs of the ground force. The Luftwaffe canceled development of the four-engine "Ural" bomber, but that was mostly because of technical and economic programs. Germany would enter World War II with its dive bombers and medium bombers, proven in Spain and believed to be sufficient against the nations Germany was most likely to fight—France, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. The grand scheme unraveled for a host of reasons,

including the vulnerability of the Stuka to counterattack.

Victory Parade

Franco had the advantage of air superiority from 1937 on, and waged an extended war of attrition in which the Republicans were pushed back into an enclave in the southeast, along the Mediterranean. The government surrendered unconditionally March 26, 1939, and Franco declared the war over on April 1.

The consensus is that the Condor Legion was an instrumental factor rather than a decisive one in the Nationalist victory. As expected with the Bf 109 in action, the Germans won the air-to-air battle, shooting down 327 Republican aircraft while losing 72 of their own. The most critical contribution was the airlift, without which Franco probably would have been defeated. Also of great value was the training by the Luftwaffe of more than 500 Spanish aircrews and thousands of soldiers in assorted military skills.

The Condor Legion went home May 28 and marched in review before Hitler and other officials in a huge parade in Berlin June 6 that reunited 14,000 veterans of the war in Spain. Three months later, Germany invaded Poland to begin World War II.

Sperrle and von Richtofen were promoted to field marshal. Von Richtofen died of a brain tumor in 1945, but Sperrle survived the war. He was tried for war crimes at Nuremberg but was acquitted.

Between 1939 and 1941, Moelders accumulated 101 more aerial victories to go with his 14 from Spain. He was promoted to major general but was killed when the He 111 in which he was a passenger crashed in bad weather in 1941.

Galland became the youngest general in the German armed forces when he replaced Moelders as head of the Luftwaffe air arm. He scored 104 aerial victories in World War II, gained popularity among his former adversaries, and was honored at the Air University Gathering of Eagles in 1984.

Franco declared Spain a "nonbelligerent"—a designation he invented—in World War II. He was sympathetic to the Axis powers that supported him in the civil war, but Spanish forces did not engage in combat.

Franco ruled Spain until his death in 1975. ■

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributing editor. His most recent article, "Churchill's Southern Strategy," appeared in the January issue.