



## Spanish Republicans against the Nazis in World War II<sup>1</sup>

### Book Review: Churchill's Spaniards: Continuing the Fight in the British Army 1939-46<sup>2</sup>

János Besenyő<sup>3</sup>

My attention was recently drawn to Séan F. Scullion's book "Churchill's Spaniards", with the excuse that as a military historian myself I had done research on the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara and the Spanish Foreign Legion. According to the historian I know, who is a historian of Spain, Scullion<sup>4</sup> has a military background like mine, currently working in the Netherlands as a NATO officer, and has done an unconventional study of the fate of soldiers who fought for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and later fought as members of the British Army against Nazi Germany and its allies in World War II. I looked into the subject and found that very few books/studies have dealt with this issue, and this is the first book in English about Spaniards serving in the British Army.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the reason why there has not been much attention paid to this subject is that most historians believe that the Spanish, although officially neutral in World War II, supported Germany, which helped Franco's regime to power, politically, diplomatically, economically and even militarily, and that a Spanish division (Blue Division), officially made up of volunteers, fought alongside the

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<sup>3</sup> Professor, Head of African Research Institute, Óbuda University, Budapest, Hungary; ORCID: 0000-0001-7198-9328; besenyo.janos@bgk.uni-obuda.hu.

<sup>4</sup> Séan F. Scullion is a bi-lingual Spanish/English speaker and an officer (Lt. Colonel) in the British Army serving in the Royal Engineers. Brought up in Spain during the later years of the Franco Regime and Spain's transition to democracy, he studied Spanish at the University of Nottingham. He has written widely on military matters and was a Spanish writer for Collins and Oxford University Press. Séan is the Secretary of the Royal Engineers Historical Society and was previously Secretary of Peninsular War 200. He leads a number of battlefield tours and is a speaker at conferences and festivals as well as on podcasts in English, Spanish and French.

<sup>5</sup> The most important of these are: Arasa, D. (1991). *Los españoles de Churchill* (Armonía).; Arasa, D. (1995). *Exiliados y enfrentados: Los españoles en Inglaterra de 1936 a 1945* (Ediciones de la Tempestad).; Postigo J. M. (2022). *Espanoles en el Ejército Británico en la II Guerra Mundial* (Magase.); Coale, R. S. (2020). "From Internees to liberators: Spanish Republican Exiles in France, 1939-1945." in Sara J. Brenneis & Gina Herrmann (eds.): *Spain, the Second World War, and the Holocaust: History and Representation* (University of Toronto Press), 199–213.

Germans in the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> However, this is not the whole truth.<sup>7</sup> It is a topos like the one in Hungary, where, when the Spanish Civil War is mentioned, everyone knows and is proud of the fact that more than 1,000 Hungarian volunteers fought in the ranks of the International Brigades, half of whom lost their lives in the fighting. No one has mentioned that at least 200 Hungarians also served on the Nationalist side. Partly it did not fit in with the historical perspective of the communist period, and partly they did not know about it. When I was researching the activities of the Spanish Foreign Legion in Western Sahara, I came across the names of several legionnaires of Hungarian origin, and over the course of several years of research I managed to compile a (probably incomplete) list of Hungarians who served in the Legion and wrote several academic publications about their activities. I sent the first two articles on this topic<sup>8</sup> to Professor Iván Harsányi (1930-2018), whose main research area was the Spanish Civil War, and who was also internationally renowned. According to the professor, only one pilot, Gyula Gunda, served on the Nationalist side, and Rudolf Andorka, the military attaché of the Kingdom of Hungary, shared intelligence information with the Spanish about Hungarians fighting on the Republican side.<sup>9</sup> After reading the article and checking the references, he called me and, after a lengthy conversation, acknowledged the article's validity and called it a niche paper. He also commended me for having spent several years as a young historian doing research whose effectiveness was questionable to many. In his opinion, a historian should explore and publish the subject he is researching as thoroughly as possible, regardless of his opinions or worldview. In this light, I found Scullion's research and the book that resulted from it particularly interesting, as it broke with the common perception that Spaniards supported rather than fought fascist regimes. Reading the book convinced me that there were indeed Spaniards, some 1,050 according to the book, who not only criticised fascist Germany and its allies as they attempted to conquer much of Europe, but also took up arms against them in defence of democratic values between 1939 and 1946. This is interesting because there have been several publications about the foreign volunteers who fought on the side of the Allies, especially the British,<sup>10</sup> but almost no one knew about the Spanish, except a select

<sup>6</sup> Payne, S. G. (2008). *Franco and Hitler: Spain, Germany, and World War II* (Yale University Press).; Cerdá, J. A. & Martínez, E. M. G. (2023). *The 'Blue Squadrons' The Spanish in the Luftwaffe, 1941-1944* (Helion Company).; Stahel, D. (2018). *Joining Hitler's Crusade* (Cambridge University Press).; Bowen, W. H. (2000). *Spaniards and Nazi Germany: Collaboration in the New Order* (University of Missouri Press).

<sup>7</sup> While the Germans were saying how much they trusted the Spanish, they were preparing to take the Spanish-held Spanish Sahara, which they needed as a logistical base for their submarine warfare and to which the Spanish would not give them access, even by force of arms. Besenyő, J. (2009). *Western Sahara* (Publikon Publishers)., 60.; "Spanisch-West Sahara, Rio de Oro mit Spanisch Sahara und Spanisch-Süd-Marokko." *Generalstab des Heeres, Abteilung für Kriegskarten und Vermessungswesen*, Berlin, 1942.

<sup>8</sup> Besenyő, J. (2019). "Magyarok a Spanyol polgárháborúban." *Századok* 153(4), 803–827.; Besenyő, J. (2019). "Hungarians in the Spanish Legion?: Węrzy w Legionie Hiszpańskim?" *Studia Polticae Universitatis Silesiensis* 26, 25–44.,

<sup>9</sup> Andorka, R. (1978). *A madridi követségtől Mauthusenig* (Kossuth).

<sup>10</sup> Prazmowska, A. (1995). *Britain and Poland 1939-1943: The Betrayed Ally* (Cambridge University Press).; Peszke, M. A. (2005). *The Polish Underground Army, the Western Allies, and the Failure of Strategic Unity in World War II* (McFarland).; Baczkowski, T. (2019). *In Peace and War 1933-1948. Memoirs of an Exiled Polish Cavalry Officer* (Helion & Company).; O'Connor, S. & Piketty, G. (2022). *Foreign Fighters*



few. Partly because the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had done his utmost to prevent Spain from entering the war on the side of Germany, the recruitment and implementation of Spanish Republicans was done in secret, and a significant number of them fought under aliases to conceal their Spanish identity (p. 194). This was important not only for the foregoing reasons, but also so that any Spanish volunteers captured would be handed over to Franco's Spain, where they would most likely face death sentences or long prison terms for their previous activities in the civil war. Since most of the Spaniards spoke little or no English, they pretended to be Gibraltarians or French when they were captured. In this way, not only were they avoided extradition to Spain, but also deportation to German concentration camps (pp. 143, 247).

The author's book, the culmination of eight years of research, describes the fate of the Republicans who fled Spain, how they scattered around the world, how they tried to make their way and how they joined first the French and later the British forces to fight against their former enemy, Nazi Germany.<sup>11</sup> We can follow how they were recruited, trained and then where and in what military operations they took part against Germany and its allies. It can be said that as members of various formations (Infantry units, Navy, Air Force, Pioneer Corps, SAS, commando units and even in the Special Operations Executive/SOE), Spaniards were deployed and sacrificed themselves at almost every front (France, Norway, Italy, Germany, North Africa, Middle East, etc.) in order to win.

The activities and experiences of these people in Africa were particularly interesting to me. After Franco's victory in 1939, many of them fled to France, where the French refused to accept them. As they did not dare to return to their homeland, the French forced them into internment camps, where they lived in very poor conditions, to 'make them easier to control' (pp. 42-47).<sup>12</sup> When the Germans occupied Poland in 1939, Britain and France began to put their military forces on alert. The French then made an offer to Spaniards and other foreigners fighting on the side of the Republicans that if they joined the French labour companies (Compagnies de Travailleurs Étrangers/CTE), which were under the control of the army and carried out military fortification work, and the French Foreign Legion (Légion Étrangère), they would be released from the internment camps. This offer was accepted by thousands of Spaniards. Partly to escape

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*and Multinational Armies: From Civil Conflicts to Coalition Wars, 1848-2015* (Routledge).

<sup>11</sup> During the Spanish Civil War, Nazi Germany provided Franco with substantial financial and military aid, even sending the Condor Legion to Spain, whose members took part in several military operations against the Republican forces. More on this: Beevor, A. (2006). *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (Penguin Books).

<sup>12</sup> In these camps, besides the Spaniards, there were other nationalities fighting on the side of the Republicans, such as Hungarians, Germans and Austrians. Some of them also joined the French Foreign Legion, but many of them escaped from the camps in adventurous ways and returned to their own countries. Ötvös, I. (2007). "A katonai főperek Magyarországon A koncepció felépítése az 1949-50-dik évi törvénysértő katonai perekben." *Doktori Disszertáció, Eötvös Lóránd Tudományegyetem Bölcsészettudományi Kar Történelemtudományok Doktori Iskola, Budapest*, 103. <http://www.sze.hu/~kallay/letolt/2011/marcius/disszert.pdf> (Accessed 17 June 2025); Erdős, A. (2020). "Egy nagykövet emlékei: magyarok Algériában." *Infovilág*, 18.05.2020, <https://infovilag.hu/egy-nagykövet-emlekei-magyarok-algeriaban/> (Accessed 17 June 2025).

the miserable conditions of the camps, and partly to fight again against Germany, which had played such a major role in the fall of the Spanish Republic (pp. 47-56). This soon happened, as the Germans invaded Denmark and then attacked Norway, which asked the British and French for help. Nearly a third of the 3,600-strong legionary contingent sent by the French was made up of Spaniards, whose efficiency and heroism surprised their French officers (pp. 68-72). After the Germans attacked France, the Spanish fought them as they had promised but were overwhelmed. The Germans invaded surrendered France, some of the Spanish survivors were not treated as prisoners of war but were taken to the concentration camps of Mauthausen and Gusen, where most of them later perished (pp. 56, 247). The others remained in France under Vichy or were sent to the Foreign Legion bases in North Africa. Many of them, because they were not treated well by the French, left the Legion and joined the British armed forces to continue the fight against the Germans and their allies.<sup>13</sup> One of them was Rafael Ramos Masens from Barcelona, who was captured by Franco forces at the Battle of the Ebro but managed to escape and then joined the French Foreign Legion and was sent to Morocco. From there he joined the British SAS Corps, where he took part in various covert operations, such as Operation Tombola in Italy (pp. 190, 191, 292). After initial reluctance, the British military leadership welcomed the Spanish volunteers, who had considerable combat experience compared to ordinary British soldiers, which the British forces were able to put to good use almost immediately. Their value was recognised by their commanding officers, who, although they considered the Spaniards to be 'hot-headed', had a very positive opinion of their military ability and courage. They were considered particularly suitable for service in the various commando units and for participation in special operations (p. 129).

Nearly 100 men from the No.1 Spanish Company of the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps (AMPC), all Spanish but led by British officers, with plans written by Ian Fleming and training carried out by Kim Philby, were to be returned to Spain as undercover (sleeper) agents as part of a series of operations linked to Operation Goldeneye. This is where the Allies believed there was a real risk of the Germans, with Spanish support, taking Gibraltar from British hands, with unforeseeable consequences (p. 94). That this did not happen was partly due to the Spanish volunteers. In 1940 in Egypt, 75 Spanish

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<sup>13</sup> These included the 300 Spanish legionnaires serving in the French Foreign Legion who rebelled against the French in the town of Avonmouth and refused to fight for Vichy France, allied with the Germans. The French High Command wanted to execute every third legionnaire for the mutiny, but the British intervened and saved the Spaniards' lives and allowed them to remain in England. Many of them joined the British armed forces. Scullion, XV, 73. There were also Spaniards left in the ranks of the "Free French", such as the 9th Company of the Régiment de marche du Tchad, known as "La Nueve", which was the subject of a documentary. Coale, R. S. (2020). "From Internees to liberators: Spanish Republican Exiles in France, 1939-1945." in Sara J. Brenneis & Gina Herrmann (eds.): *Spain, the Second World War, and the Holocaust: History and Representation* (University of Toronto Press), 199–213.; „La Nueve, The Forgotten Men of the 9th Company" *P-OLife*, <https://anglophone-direct.com/la-nueve-the-forgotten-men-of-the-9th-company-argeles/> (Accessed 17 June 2025).; Hird, A. (2021). "Paris honours the forgotten Spanish fighters who liberated the French capital." *Radio France Internationale*, 25.08.2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20210825-paris-honours-the-forgotten-spanish-fighters-la-nueve-who-liberated-the-capital-liberation-world-war-2-nazi-general-charles-de-gaulle> (Accessed 17 June 2025).





volunteers, previously serving in the French Foreign Legion, joined the commando units in the Middle East theatre of operations, many of whom were captured in the Battle of Crete. Among those captured was Francisco Geronimo, who escaped and was rescued after 11 months in hiding. He then joined the 2nd SAS Regiment and fought with them throughout the rest of the war (pp. 141, 199-201). Few people know, but among the participants in the “Operation Flipper”, the plan to capture - or eliminate - the desert fox, the leader of the German forces in Africa, Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel, were Spanish volunteers, two of whom are mentioned by name (p. 185).

As a historian, Scullion not only describes the successes of the Spanish, but also their failures, such as José Bosque, who had to be removed from the army (p. 107), or the Spaniard Private López, who murdered a French officer in the heat of an argument and was therefore put before a firing squad (pp. 177-178). Also, about how one of them, Fernando Casabayo, who was very well thought of by SOE recruiters, betrayed his comrades and reported directly to Franco's Spanish secret service through the Spanish embassy in London, who shared their information with Nazi Germany and even Japan (pp. 107-109). Despite this, the achievements of the Spanish volunteers are not to be questioned, and they performed as well as any British soldier during the war. What remains a question for me is how many and who of the Spaniards served in the Air Force and Navy, as they are not mentioned by the author, who has written primarily the story of those in the Army. It would be worthwhile to include the history of Spaniards serving in the other services to complete the research.

The author also deals, albeit briefly, with the fate of the Spaniards after the war, how they were disappointed by the Allies, who did not remove the Franco regime and later collaborated with it. Thus, the more than 500 Spaniards who settled in England formed their own organisation, the Spanish Ex-Servicemen's Association, and through it tried to weaken the Franco regime by any means at their disposal.

The book is a niche work, made even more valuable by the fact that the author has used previously unpublished material from British, French and Spanish archives in his research, and in accordance with the requirements of “oral history”, he has also conducted interviews with family members and descendants of the former republicans. Published by Helion & Co., this extremely detailed and well-documented 268-page book contains tables, lists and photographs that make the stories of the Spaniards even more understandable and personal. And the index of names and objects makes the work of researchers easier.

I can heartily recommend Scullion's book to anyone interested in the events of World War II, not just through “dry data” but through real, actual and exciting human stories. The book will also be of interest to those who are interested in special operations and the history and military history of the 20th century.

### *Conflict of Interest*

The author is a member of the Editorial Board. The manuscript was handled independently to avoid any conflict of interest.

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