

EUROPE AT WAR 1936-1939

The Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War lasted from July 1936 until April 1939; it began after a declaration of military opposition by a group of army generals to the existing moderate liberal coalition government. The coup was supported by military units in the Spanish protectorate of Morocco, however rebel units in some of the major cities such as Madrid, Pamplona, Cadiz and Cordoba did not gain control and these cities remained under the control of the government. Spain was thus left militarily and politically divided.

The rebels termed themselves Nationalists and the result of the coup was that the Nationalists controlled an area containing approximately 11 million of Spain's population and around half of the Territorial Army. The war was cast by the Republicans as a struggle between tyranny and freedom and by the Nationalists as communist and anarchists, red hordes verses Christian civilisation. During the first few months both armies were joined in quite high numbers by volunteers, Nationalists by approximately 100,000 men and Republicans by some 120,000. Also the final months of 1936 saw the arrival of foreign troops, International Brigades joining the Republican side and Portuguese, Italian and the German Condor Legion the Nationalists. Only two countries supported the Republican cause, Russia and Mexico. Other

factions included Catalan and Basque. The Basques, who for the most part were Catholics, generally sided with the Republicans although this was not always the case.

On the fifth day of the uprising a large airlift of Nationalist supporting troops from Spanish Morocco was organised which ultimately enabled the Nationalists to close the French border to the Republicans. By this point the Nationalists were being led by General Franco soon to be known as *Generalissimo*. For their part the Republicans were proving less effective militarily, relying on disorganised revolutionary militias. In October Franco's troops reached Madrid, launching a major offensive against the city on November 8th. Although the Republicans were able to repulse the attack, the government was forced to shift from Madrid to Valencia outside the combat zone. Having failed to take the capital Franco took to bombarding it from the air and over the next three years tried to encircle and besiege the capital. With his ranks swelled by troops from Italy and Spanish Morocco Franco continued his offensive throughout 1937 and although Madrid remained in Republican hands, Malaga fell on February 9th. The war in the North began in March with the Biscay Campaign, the Basques in particular suffered and when the Condor Legion bombed Guernica they were forced to retreat. Over 20,000 children were evacuated to destinations including the UK. In May 1937 over 4,000 Basque children disembarked from the overcrowded liner SS Habana in Southampton. These were disbursed to some

eighty camps all over the UK. *Hoxne resident Poppy Vulliamy took over 100 of these to Wherstead Hall where she and her sister had established a safe haven for the children. A number of these children were taken to Hoxne to camp one summer much to the dislike of the local lads!*

In fighting among the Republican forces during April and May was not exploited by the Nationalists and strong counter offensives indicated a stiffening of the resolve of the Republicans. Despite this with heavy German and Italian air support Franco was able to make steady progress in the north and by November with Nationalist troops closing in on Valencia, the government was forced to move again, this time to Barcelona. In early 1938 Nationalists launched the Aragon offensive during which they pushed through to the Mediterranean cutting the Republican held portion of Spain in two. This caused the Republican government to sue for peace in early May. Franco demanded unconditional surrender and so the war raged on. Also at this time the Franco-British appeasement of Hitler in Munich effectively destroyed Republican morale by ending any hope of an anti-fascist alliance with the Western powers.

Eight days before the end of the year Franco threw massive forces in to the invasion of Catalonia; Barcelona fell on January 26th 1939 and Girona followed on February 2nd. On February 27th Britain and France formally recognised the Franco regime. The war continued throughout March with

Madrid falling on the 31st and on April 1st Franco proclaimed victory in a radio speech by which time all Republican forces had surrendered. Sadly at the end of the war there were harsh reprisals against Franco's former enemies. Thousands of Republicans were imprisoned and at least 30,000 were executed. At least 500,000 fled to France and guerrilla warfare continued well into the 1950's.