

*Раздел I.*

**ВОЕННОЕ ИСКУССТВО И БОЕВЫЕ ДЕЙСТВИЯ  
ВТОРОЙ МИРОВОЙ И ВЕЛИКОЙ ОТЕЧЕСТВЕННОЙ ВОЙН.  
ВОПРОСЫ ИСТОРИОГРАФИИ И ИСТОЧНИКОВЕДЕНИЯ**

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**THE MEANING OF THE “BLUE SPAIN” FIGHT IN RUSSIA,  
1941-1944\***

The Blue Division was above all an amalgamation of complexities. We could define it as the Spanish fighting Unit that fought on the Eastern front during the Second World War under the German Army [1]. With this definition we refer to its military essence, but we discard other fundamental aspects, perhaps the principal ones: its politico-diplomatic aspects.

In large part, the Blue Division was the *Falange* (pseudo fascist Spanish party in Franco’s Spain) between Franco (Franco’s Regime) and Hitler (Hitler’s Regime). This a key factor in the understanding of this historic event, praised by some, despised by others and forgotten by the majority of people.

Spain, neutral from the beginning of the war, declared itself non-belligerent, occupied Tangier and offered military support to Hitler in June 1940. But, after many frustrated illusions (Hendaya’s interview between Franco and Hitler and other interviews between Foreign Affairs ministry Ramon Serrano Suñer and Hitler/Ribbentrop) on the 7<sup>th</sup> December Franco said “no” to the German request for passage in order to take the Rock of Gibraltar [2]. This

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opened a period of great uncertainty in the fortunes of the country.

For six months, until June 1941, the diplomatic pressures of the Germans over the Spanish government were constant and even turned into a menace. But the real danger for the integrity of Spanish territory lay in the secret preparations of the British Headquarters initiated in April. Preparations for *Operation Puma*: the occupation of one of the Canary Islands by 24.000 men at the case that the Axis Forces penetrated at the Iberian Peninsula. Even then, what Franco's Regime and a section of public opinion most feared was an eventual German invasion of Spanish territory [3].

All this changed during the early hours of Sunday June 22<sup>nd</sup>: 191 divisions of Germans and their allies (namely Romanians and Finns), more than three million men, launched into Soviet territory. Without doubt on that day Franco sighed a sign of relief.

Ramon Serrano Suñer became tense. He interpreted these circumstances as a great opportunity to recover lost power. Only one month early, in the political Spanish crisis of May 1941, Franco had seized control of the only political party permitted in Spain, the *Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las JONS*. José Luis de Arrese covered the post of Secretary General for the *Falange*. He was a man docile to Franco and very shortly was to demonstrate himself to be a declared enemy of Serrano Suñer.

For other motives tension entered into the Party with Serrano Suñer. The *Falange* had to take part in the invasion at all costs. The almost certain German victory would also mean victory for “*falangismo*” (the *Falange's* movement) over its internal enemies, especially the Spanish Army.

*Falangismo*, the pseudo-fascist movement, what had wanted to define the epoch but had stayed on the periphery, was now at last in a position to take hold of the reigns of the Spanish State. Of the hand of the *New Hitlerite European Order*, strengthened with the eventual Soviet defeat, a new “*Nacional-sindicalista*” Spain promised to be born. It would be the Spain of the deceased founder of the *Falange*: José Antonio Primo de Rivera, son of the dictator (1923–1930) Miguel Primo de Rivera.

Serrano Suñer started to work immediately. He visited Franco and then offered *falangista* volunteers to the German Ambassador, Eberhard von Stohrer, on the same morning of 22<sup>nd</sup> June. Also a general mobilization was organized by

the Party by way of a gathering and demonstration on 24<sup>th</sup> of June, using Serrano Suñer's famous cry "*Russia is guilty!*", and by the way of the circular of Arrese on the 26<sup>th</sup>.

However, once again, Franco stopped them. The highly decorated and Army Minister, General Enrique Varela, was decided from the beginning to send a regular army unit to the fighting. After a stormy cabinet meeting, in which Serrano Suñer and Varela launched into a violent and somewhat insulting discussion, Franco left the project in the hands of the Army (Central Headquarters guideline of the 28<sup>th</sup>). The *Falange* would supply volunteers but however would fight under military control (many *Falange* leaders, officials and two thirds of the non-commissioned officers would be soldiers).

Leaving aside internal conflicts the significant fact is that Franco's Spain was ready and willing to help Hitler's Germany in "*The Anti-Bolshevic Crusade*", as they then referred. This action not only reflected internal ambitions and the above mentioned struggles, but was also an acknowledgement of the help received for the Franco's Army from Germany during the Civil War: a payment for the *Condor Legion*.\*

Not without reservations Berlin (Ribbentrop and Hitler) accepted the offer in the hope that it would be followed up by the formal declaration of war against Moscow, a declaration of war that for the fortune of Franco's Regime never was to arrive.

### **The meaning of the Blue Division for Germany**

#### **1) In Military Terms**

Though relatively small in size, the Blue Division was a military aid for Germany. On the Eastern front the German Army had a tremendous area to cover, a task that would finally lead to its downfall. For two years, between October 1941 and October 1943, about 45.500 men covered 40 kilometres on the western bank of the River Voljov (first) and 34 kilometres around Kolpino, and industrial suburb on Leningrad (afterwards).\* Furthermore, the Division created one other legacy: The Blue Legion [4] that lent 2.200 men to fight for

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\* Very soon the enterprise had the opposition of Great Britain (Ambassador Samuel Hoare) and the United States of North America (Ambassador Carlton Hayes).

\* Permanently there were in Russia between 16.000 and 18.000 men that from time to time were relieved.

five months, between October 1943 and March 1944 (strictly it only fought in December and January). They were employed to defend 12 kilometres in the region of Kostovo, half-way between the Division's two fronts\*\*

In short, although the Blue Division was scarcely effective as a force for the Germans as a whole, it was efficient in its fighting tasks. Hitler recognised this in January 1942 when he said the Spaniards were "*fearless in the face of death*", and in April of the same year when he said that "*they know the meaning of loyalty and courage*". Gratitude was demonstrated in 2.500 Iron Crosses, 2.200 Military Merit Crosses and numerous lesser decorations awarded. Hitler also uniquely created a special medal for them. As yet unsupported, personal sources seem to support the idea that the Division was responsible for two Soviet casualties for every one of their own. Whatever it was, the Blue Division give a good treatment to the Russian civil population.

## **2) In Political Terms**

For the first chief of Unit, General Agustín Muñoz Grandes, and for Berlin the months of spring and summer 1942 led to a great hope for political change in the Madrid government. Franco should be an honorific chief of State and Muñoz Grandes should have the real power. A change that it fulfilled would result in Spanish entrance into the war (an entrance more necessary after November, with the Anglo-Saxon landing in North Africa).

## **3) In Diplomatic Terms**

From the diplomatic perspective the Blue Division provoked serious problems to the German Embassy in Madrid and some Consulates in other parts of Spain. This was due to the well orchestrated action of the British Diplomatic Service. This diplomacy instigated dissatisfaction against Germany amongst repatriated Blue Division members (those suffering from venereal diseases) and the families of the deceased (who desired economic aid).

## **4) In Economic Terms**

On an economic level Germany found itself having to assume during the war the costs derived from equipping the Unit and treatment of the convalescing wounded. After the war, in May of 1962, a bilateral agreement on pension

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\*\* Some hundreds of secret combatants also continued fighting to the end of the war at the side of Germany, some within the Armed Forces and some within the armed militias of SS.

complements was signed. This led in 1965 to the Treasury taking charge of pension complements for mutilated Division members and the families of the dead (widows and orphans). In 1994 the payments totalled 80 million Deutsche Marks.

### **5) In Social Terms**

Finally, from the social angle, Germany generated a moment of affection for the Blue Division. This can be shown in the crowded receptions in railway stations. However, shortly afterwards, the Blue Division provoked strong tensions during its stay at the Grafenwöhr training camp, in Bavaria, due to its peculiar way of interpreting the gallantry relationship. Finally, the subjugated German people thanked the aid the Blue Division was giving by showering attention on Division members on permission and those who were hospitalized. Sentimental relationships also inevitably developed.

### **The meaning of the Blue Division for Spain**

Finally we will analyze the meaning of the Blue Division for Spain by the same criterion that we have been applied for Germany: namely military, political, diplomatic, economic and social perspectives.

#### **1) In Military Terms**

From the military aspect the Blue Division signified the rather camouflaged official participation, as a voluntary unit, of Spain in World War Two. And more precisely in the German-Soviet War, that evolved over four years between 1941 and 1945, and which concluded in the taking of Berlin by the Red Army.

Initially the Blue Division was a contingent of 18.000 men amongst five million. It covered forty kilometres out of 2.400 in total. Finally it resulted offering 5.000 lives out of eleven million and 20.000 wounded out of 25 million.

Therefore, in strictly military terms, size-wise it was a mere drop of water in a convulsive ocean. However quality wise its participation, as we have stated, was notable. From its initiation as a rather scruffy unit indignant to participate in the attack on Moscow, it progressed into having a reputation for its men's toughness and risky actions. An example: At the beginning of 1942, following the unleashing of the first great soviet offensive, 543 Germans lay situated close to a position on the South of Lake Ilmen. The German control, overshadowed by the magnitude of the Soviet attack, requested a Blue Division expedition to liberate them. Muñoz Grandes chose the recently created Skiing

Company. They took eleven days of march in zigzag over huge fissures in the frozen lake and with temperatures as low as  $-50^{\circ}\text{C}$  to conclude the operation. Meanwhile they conquered six villages on the way. The outcome: 12 fit men out of 228, 95 per cent of the total injured, 18 by amputation of both legs.

In the context of this fighting to the extreme we must weigh up three factors in order to appreciate the losses suffered by the Blue Division:

First factor: A hostile environment. The Russian steppes with temperatures which oscillated between  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}/-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  in winter 1941/42. Russia was suffering its coldest winter of the century. These conditions were supported without the necessary winter equipment, because until February 1942 no winter overcoats had arrived from the German side.

Second factor: An exasperating lack of technical supplies on the armament level. Artillery was scarce or deficient. Spanish aviation pilots didn't be employed to cover some sections of the North Russian front. Concerning the Blue Division's mobile resources the Unit was not motorized rather horse-drawn, and on entering the campaign was forced to give the few trucks it possessed. In the first few months sanity care and resources were needed in the evacuation chaos and absence of support networks.

Third factor: The growing potential of Soviet forces. Initially they were poorly equipped for the first campaigns on the Voljov. However they counted on an outstanding artillery potential on the Leningrad front. From 1944 they demonstrated a crushing superiority in front of the Blue Legion, who had been obliged to pull back 140 kilometres marching in the midst of hostile partisans\*.

All these factors therefore account for the high proportion of casualties - 56 per cent- suffered by the Blue Division: 5.000 deaths, 9.000 wounded, 8.000 sick, 2.000 mutilated, 1.500 frozen and 400 prisoners form part of the most tragic element of the Spanish involvement in World War II. But all these factors explain only in part the essential living experience of the war. There are many other variables to take into consideration. We will mention only three:

First: A strange diet for the Mediterranean palate. This was responsible for producing gastro-intestinal charges and was calorie-wise insufficient. It thus needed to be complemented from Spain. Also the lack at many times of black

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\* And they demonstrated more than crushing superiority in front of the Spanish clandestine combatants.

tobacco added to the desperation of the Spanish forces.

Second: The paradox of the initial difficult relationship with the Germans alongside the good feeling which existed between the Division and the Russian people. They shared house, home and sentimental relationships which led to all types of situations, including disguised adoptions. And the Russian population saw the Spanish, up to certain point, as a buffer against German treatment which was largely impregnated by racist elements. So there were even the reports of columns of Russians following the Blue Division in its manoeuvres. Even almost today former Division members participating in organized visits to past places had received demonstrations of affection, in part, those connected to the theme of the burial in Russian territory.

Third: The captives. On average over eleven years captives were dispersed between 20 Soviet concentration camps. They lacked all contact with the exterior and even correspondence and parcels were banned. Settlement for the prisoners did not arrive until 1954. It could have been resolved in 1947 if negotiations had taken their due course. However Franco's regime gave way to the *Truman Doctrine* and this frustrated the attempts for the liberation.

## **2) In Political Terms**

From the political perspective the Blue Division meant several things for Spain:

- For *Falangismo*, which was weakened from the end of the Civil War, it signified its rehabilitation and war-like projection out of Spain.

- For the Armed Forces the Blue Division was an important responsibility as it fell under its control. As the campaign advanced it was responsible for recruitment.

- For both (*Falange* and Army) and a large part of volunteers the Blue Division was an anti-communist product, peculiar to the epoch, which complied with the *Anti-Komintern Pact*. This pact was responsible for the dragging of thousands of Western-European middle and upper class men onto the Russian front.

- For the entire Franco Regime it was ambiguous reality. On the side it was a stabilizing factor because it allowed the radical *Falangists* to let off steam from home. We must say that they had become very frustrated long before to the end of the Civil War, especially with the *Unification Decree* (forced unification of *Falangism* with other political forces) of April 1937. However in the hands of

General Agustín Muñoz Grandes regeneration anxieties it was also a destabilizing factor, as it was in the constant friction between *Falange* and Army.

– Finally, for nearly everybody the Blue Division was more Spanish Civil War! Hence for the obsessed Regime's volunteers it signified the chance of “*return the visit*” -in inverted commas- to the Soviet military and Advisory. This was especially the case for those who had suffered the repressive effects of the rearguard S.I.M. (*Republican Military Intelligence Service*). But as the volunteers of Republican origin –which of course there were- the Blue Division signified the possibility of avenging the defeat they had suffered in Civil War, this time by desertion on the Russian battlefields. Even out of exile the Republicans nurtured ideas of fighting the Franco's Regime, whether from Mexico or the Soviet Union.

### **3) In Diplomatic Terms**

For Spanish diplomacy, the Blue Division was hope, cooperation and payment of a debt.

1. Hope. For a period of time the Blue Division was seen as the ideal way of placing Spain in a preferential position in the *New European Order* with the “Great Germany” (in inverted commas) at the centre. In fact, although distorted, the *New Order* was a way of understanding a part of Europe that integrated Western Europe and excluded Great Britain. The “*Anticomunist Crusade*” (more inverted commas) at the same time drew the Continent around Berlin towards the East. Thus, the Baltic Countries, Belorussia, Ukraine and Russia would be definitively inserted into the West. But the *New Order* was more: it had socially-favourable connotations for various social sectors. As stated by Professor Wayne Bowen, many shared the perception that *The Age of Progress*, destroyed by World War I, followed by *The Age of Chaos* of twenties and thirties, had finally been overcoming with *The Age of the New Order*: social peace on dictatorial basis [5].

Cooperation with Germany did have limits in nearly everybody's Spanish minds: Independence at all costs. They wanted collaboration with Hitler but without German penetration in Spanish territory. The negotiations between Hitler and Muñoz Grandes in December 1942 together with German diplomacy in Madrid in first half of 1943 both point towards the idea of help, even entry into the war, but never at the price of allowing German troops in Spain.



This idea of independence explains why Serrano Suñer aspired to entry into the *New Order* but always on equal terms with Germany. In this respect the Blue Division could contribute to this objective: Madrid would aid German victory over the Soviet Union but in autonomous manner. Of fact, it was a Unit with separate control, laws and integrity which was dependent on the Spanish Ministry of War.

2. Cooperation factor. Leaving aside hope in diplomatic terms the Blue Division was the maximum component in Spanish collaboration with Hitler, following much further behind was the sending of Spanish workers to German factories: 10.500 according with Professor José Luis Rodríguez Jiménez[6].

3. Payment of a debt. Finally in the diplomatic field the Blue Division meant the cancellation of a debt that Spain had with the Third Reich. A blood debt paid off and reversed sixteen times (5.000 died for 300 of the Condor Legion). This debt was also economic, reversed by one and a half times with relevant discounts taken in consideration.

#### **4) In Economic Terms**

From a strictly economic perspective the Blue Division was an immense cost for the ruined Spanish Treasury. Only 613 million pesetas -more than three million Euros- remained in its coffers after the end of the war in 1945.

#### **5) In Social Terms**

On the social level the Blue Division was ambiguous for Spain. On one hand it was a melting pot for a world of rich and poor, illiterate and students, town and country folk... to name but a few categories. But on the other, it was a homogeneous element: young man (normally under 30 years), bachelors (90 per cent) and with a high intellectual component in 1941 and 1942. Of fact it was a clear representation of the middle classes at the beginning, which was to evolve with military recruitment into a body fed mainly by workers, mainly agricultural ones. And the Blue Division was also a fissure in an impermeable social and political system. With the concession of ex-combatant status in Franco's Army for which four months of service in the East Front was enough, it was an opportunity for those who had fought for the Republic in the Civil War to be finally overlooked by the Franco's Regime.

Finally, to conclude, the Blue Division even today is a very complex reality which is difficult to evaluate. We hope this work has helped to shed some

light on this historical accident that forms part of the hard times surrounding the obscure Spanish civil post-war years.

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