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# “A Little World War”

## Lessons From the Spanish Civil War for Contemporary Strategists

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## Introduction

*Before writing off the totalitarian world as a nightmare that can't come true, just remember that in 1925 the world of today would have seemed a nightmare that can't come true (...) We in England underrate the danger of this kind of thing, because our traditions and our past security have given us a sentimental belief that it all comes right in the end and the thing you most fear never really happens. Nourished for hundreds of years on a literature in which Right invariably triumphs in the last chapter, we believe half-instinctively that evil always defeats itself in the long run. Pacifism, for instance, is founded largely on this belief. Don't resist evil, and it will somehow destroy itself. But why should it? What evidence is there that it does? And what instance is there of a modern industrialized state collapsing unless conquered from the outside by military force? (...) The outcome of the Spanish war was settled in London, Paris, Rome, Berlin—at any rate not in Spain... (...)the Spanish civil war demonstrated that the Nazis knew what they were doing, and their opponents did not.*

George Orwell, "Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War," an essay first published in 1943, available at: <https://files.libcom.org/files/Looking%20back%20on%20the%20Spanish%20War%20-%20George%20Orwell.pdf>

A grim laboratory for military adaptation and experimentation, with authoritarian powers inking their partnership in the blood of slaughtered civilians.

A ruthless war of attrition waged on a large, strategically located European country's soil, resulting in waves of refugees and hundreds of thousands of casualties.<sup>1</sup> Horrific, norm-shattering levels of violence, with brutal ethnic auxiliaries and idealistic international volunteers cast into a macabre symphony of operations, one whose jolting movements—from the battle of Bakhmut to the siege of the Alcázar—occasionally appear more ideologically inspired than strategically driven.<sup>2</sup> A grim laboratory for military adaptation and experimentation, with authoritarian powers inking their partnership in the blood of slaughtered civilians, and cementing their crepuscular shared vision in the smoking wreckage of ruined cities. War-weary, militarily overextended democracies, fearful of a wider conflagration

<sup>1</sup> While estimates vary, it is believed that the Spanish Civil War led to over 500,000 military and civilian deaths. Since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, the war in Ukraine has resulted in even larger numbers of casualties, with some open-source analyses indicating that Russian forces alone may have sustained approximately 325,000 combat deaths (and 1.2 million casualties). As one recent report notes, "no major power has suffered anywhere near these numbers of casualties in any war since World War II." See Seth G. Jones and Riley McCabe, *Russia's Grinding War in Ukraine: Massive Losses and Tiny Gains for a Declining Power* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2026), available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-grinding-war-ukraine>. As of February 14, 2026, British Intelligence estimated that Russia had likely sustained 1,023 daily casualties, on average, since the beginning of this calendar year. See *British Defence Intelligence Update on Ukraine*, February 14, 2026, available at <https://x.com/DefenceHQ/status/2022574088812630475?s=20> The number of Ukrainian troops killed over the course of the conflict is almost equally hard to fully gauge, although President Zelensky recently stated that up to 55,000 Ukrainian soldiers had fallen in battle, with an additional large number registered as "missing." See Sarah Rainsford and Paulin Kola, "55,000 Ukrainian Soldiers Killed in War with Russia, Zelensky Says," *BBC News*, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgn2dzwd1do>

<sup>2</sup> On brutalized ethnic auxiliaries being used by an imperial power as frontline shock troops one could draw an interesting, albeit grim, parallel on the viciousness Franco's Moroccan *Regulares* during the Spanish Civil War, and of Kadyrov's Chechen fighters currently fighting in Ukraine, with both forces regularly engaging (and encouraged by their imperial overseers to engage) in atrocities. See "Kadyrov's Men: a Brutal Force Serving Putin in Ukraine," *France 24*, July 04, 2022, available at <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220407-kadyrov-s-men-a-brutal-force-serving-putin-in-ukraine> Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp.268-318, and Gema Varona, "Janus in the Metropole: Moroccan Soldiers and Sexual Violence Against Women in the Spanish Civil War," *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 10, No.4, 2021, pp.78-89.

and refusing to intervene directly, even as their authoritarian rivals ratchet up their levels of violence and engage in ever more baroque acts of savagery. Supine external great powers and moneygrubbing private corporations, hoggishly profiting from the carnage, or blithely choosing to look the other way.<sup>3</sup> And throughout it all, a fervid climate of ideological polarization, with a dense fog of deception and disinformation extending its clammy reach over the pockmarked battlefield.

For any student of history, the degree to which the above paragraph could apply almost equally to the war in Ukraine or to the Spanish Civil War, which raged from July 1936 to April 1939, is both striking and disquieting. The interwar conflict appears to constitute one of those eerie moments of historical resonance which, from time in time, claw their way out of the darker recesses of our collective memory, to present themselves, still blinking and disheveled, to our analogy-starved community of policy analysts and practitioners. As myriad statesmen, historians and political scientists have noted over the centuries, analogical reasoning constitutes a natural cognitive shortcut for all human beings, and especially for perennially overwhelmed decisionmakers.<sup>4</sup> After all, "we understand shapes by comparing them with other shapes we know; we understand processes by comparing them with other processes we know; we understand history by comparing what we know about it with what we have experienced or can imagine."<sup>5</sup> The appeal to analogy, or to some form of a recognizable precedent, is therefore—provided it is done in a discerning fashion—not so much a methodological vice, as an epistemological necessity, the only true means by which our inherently bounded intellects can plumb the vast, dim depths of human experience with the hope of better navigating our storm-tossed present.<sup>6</sup>

Little surprise, therefore, that President Zelensky, on an official trip to Spain in 2025, seized the opportunity to stand a moment in quiet contemplation in front of the giant, ash-grey forms silently writhing and screaming at the heart of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*; or that he and others have drawn a parallel between the fiery destruction visited upon the Basque town in 1937, and the brutish, indiscriminate violence wrought by Russian, North Korean, and Iranian weaponry in contemporary Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> It is an analogy which—especially for Western European audiences—has an immediate, and raw power. And like all historical analogies, for all its symbolic resonance and moral potency, it is also evidently imperfect.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the role played by key American companies such as the oil company Texaco, the car manufacturing firm Ford, or the chemical company Dupont of Nemours, which defied or circumvented US neutrality laws, supplying Francoist forces with millions of tons of oil, thousands of trucks, and large numbers of bombs and explosives. In the case of Dupont, American-made bombs were funneled through Germany to bypass neutrality agreements, and then employed by the Condor Legion. See Adam Hochschild, "How Texaco Helped Franco Win the Spanish Civil War," *Mother Jones*, March 29, 2016, available at <https://www.mother-jones.com/politics/2016/03/texaco-franco-spanish-civil-war-rieber/> and the classic study Douglas Little, *Malevolent Neutrality: The United States, Great Britain, and the Origins of the Spanish Civil War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> There is a rich literature on the use of historical analogies by policymakers. For some of the more seminal works on the issue, see Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1988), and Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.43.

<sup>6</sup> On the importance of discernment in applied history, see Iskander Rehman, "Why Applied History Matters," *Engelsberg Ideas*, November 20, 2021, available at <https://engelsbergideas.com/essays/why-applied-history-matters/>

<sup>7</sup> See Suman Naishadham, "Zelensky Visits Picasso's Guernica Painting After Drawing Parallel to Ukraine's Bombing," *Associated Press*, November 18, 2025, available at <https://apnews.com/article/zelensky-ukraine-spain-russia-war-ed58ec3cd0d7995b9e9dff3090a30076>

The interwar conflict appears to constitute one of those eerie moments of historical resonance which, from time in time, claw their way out of the darker recesses of our collective memory.

There is still an immense value in revisiting the tragic record of the one of the twentieth century's most consequential conflicts.

To give but a few, glaringly obvious, examples: unlike France, Great Britain and the United States during the Spanish Civil War, Western democracies—for all their nuclear-tinged fears of escalation and unwillingness to deploy troops on Ukrainian soil—have plied their partners in Kyiv with large numbers of weaponry and intelligence.<sup>8</sup> Although doubts linger over the US' continued willingness to support the Ukrainians in their existential struggle, European democracies have proven remarkably (and some might say unexpectedly) stalwart in their support thus far. Meanwhile, although the issue of support to Ukraine has become a wedge issue within the American Republican party, public polling shows that support for Ukraine remains relatively robust across Europe, with ideological opposition to aiding Ukraine and/or overt Russophilia remaining circumscribed to certain outlier parties (on the extreme right or left of the political spectrum) or third-tier, growingly illiberal economies within the European Union (Hungary and Slovakia).<sup>9</sup> This presents a stark contrast with the ideologically fractured political landscape of late interwar Europe and America, when both political elites and general citizenries frequently found themselves far more torn on the issue of intervention.<sup>10</sup> This was particularly true in late 1930s France, where Prime Minister Leon Blum eventually decided against supporting the Spanish Republic for fear of sparking widespread unrest, or even a military coup, within France itself.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Ukrainian forces have arguably proven more skilled and resilient than the brave, but poorly trained and ideologically riven armies of Republican Spain. Conversely, the invading authoritarian aggressors, both Russian and North Korean, have—for all their demonstrated willingness to sustain grievous losses and adapt over the course of the conflict—shown less tactical acumen than the callous "volunteers" of the Condor Legion, or the battle-hardened cadre of *Africanista* officers serving under Franco.<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding these noteworthy differences, however, there is still an immense value in revisiting the tragic record of the one of the twentieth century's most consequential conflicts, that dark, interregal moment when, as George Orwell solemnly observed to Arthur Koestler (a fellow Spanish Civil war participant), it seemed as though history had either suddenly

<sup>8</sup> On how fears regarding the possibility of Russian nuclear escalation affected US and allied decision-making, see "The 2022 Nuclear Crisis: A Retrospective," *The Russia Contingency Podcast* (with Austin Long, Pranay Vaddi and Michael Kofman), available at <https://open.spotify.com/episode/4gPnX6kPYHKzJukklisTT6y> and Lachlan MacKenzie, *Six Days in October: Russia's Dirty Bomb Signaling and the Return of Nuclear Crises* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024), available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/six-days-october-russias-dirty-bomb-signaling-and-return-nuclear-crises>

<sup>9</sup> See "Public Opinion on Russia's War Against Ukraine," February 23, 2026, European Parliament Public Opinion Monitoring Unit, available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/public-opinion-on-the-war-in-ukraine>

<sup>10</sup> As the historian Paul Preston painfully reminds us, "Members of the British government and the diplomatic corps, for reasons of class and education, sympathized with the anti-revolutionary aims of the Nationalists as they did with those of Hitler and Mussolini. It was commonplace for Spanish aristocrats and the scions of the main sherry exporting families to be educated at English Catholic public schools such as Beaumont, Downside, Ampleforth, and Stonyhurst." See Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge* (London, UK: William Collins, 2006), p.139.

<sup>11</sup> See Peter Jackson, "Strategie et Ideologie: Le Haut Commandement Francais et la Guerre Civile Espagnole," *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains*, No.199, 2001, pp.111-123, and Anthony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (London, UK: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2006), Chapter 13.

<sup>12</sup> For an excellent, panoramic overview of the war in Ukraine since the invasion of 2022, see Michael Kofman, "Ukraine's War of Endurance: The Fight for Advantage in the Conflict's Fifth Year," *Foreign Affairs*, February 16, 2026, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/ukraines-war-endurance>

accelerated or ground to a halt.<sup>13</sup> Especially—but not only—when discussing the ongoing war in Ukraine. This is for three main reasons, each of which will be explored in detail below.

- First, the history of “lessons learned” during the Spanish Civil War highlights the importance of finding a healthy equilibrium between overinterpreting certain tactical evolutions and military innovations and dismissing them outright.
- Second, this bloody episode in European history is a cautionary tale of collective deterrence failure. It demonstrates the perils of adopting a hemiplegic, overly cautious approach in the face of more adventurist and risk-acceptant authoritarian powers, and the risks of trading a parlous short-term peace for far greater long-term risks.
- And last but not least, the broader repercussions of the Spanish Civil War further invalidate the notion that any global proxy war can somehow remain neatly quarantined to one particular sub-region—as some Western policymakers had hoped at the time.<sup>14</sup> In short, just like the Axis powers of yesteryear, our authoritarian challengers increasingly think and coordinate across regional seams. So should we.

<sup>13</sup> See George Orwell, “Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War,” an essay first published in 1943, available at: <https://files.libcom.org/files/Looking%20back%20on%20the%20Spanish%20War%20-%20George%20Orwell.pdf> The tragic history of the Spanish Civil War has been told, with exacting detail, in several excellent English-language books, and there is not room to provide even a cursory overview of its complex chronology here. For a small sampling of the extant literature, see Anthony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (London, UK: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2006), Richard Rhodes, *Hell and Good Company: The Spanish Civil War and the World it Made* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2015), and Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge* (London, UK: William Collins, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> See Jeffrey W. Hornung, “Ukraine is Now a Proxy War for Asian Powers,” *Foreign Policy*, November 18, 2024, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/11/18/ukraine-russia-proxy-war-china-north-korea-south-japan-geopolitics/>

## Two Global Proxy Wars And Laboratories For Military Experimentation

*"When the civil war broke out in Spain, Franco sent a call for help to Germany and asked for support, particularly in the air. One should not forget that Franco with his troops was stationed in Africa and that he could not get the troops across, as the fleet was in the hands of the Communists...The decisive factor was, first of all, to get his troops over to Spain. The Fuhrer thought the matter over. I urged him to give support under all circumstances, firstly, in order to prevent the further spread of communism in that theater, and secondly, to test my young Luftwaffe at this opportunity in this or that technical respect. With the permission of the Fuhrer, I sent a large part of my transport fleet and a number of experimental fighter units, bombers and anti-aircraft guns; and in that way I had an opportunity to ascertain, under combat conditions, whether the material was equal to the task. In order that the personnel, too, might gather a certain amount of experience, I saw to it there was a continuous flow, that is, that new people were constantly being sent and others recalled."*

Hermann Göring, Testimony, 6 May 1946, *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal*, Vol. 9 (Nuremberg, Germany: International Military Tribunal, 1947), pp. 318–319

Up to half of all Russian artillery expenditure in 2025 was of North Korean provenance.

In recent years, Western nations have borne witness to the deployment of tens of thousands of North Korean soldiers, deminers and engineers to Ukraine, in addition to Iranian drones and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) operatives, hundreds of Syrian mercenaries under Assad, and—in what is now a relatively open secret, huge amounts of dual-use and not so dual-use support from China to Russia's war effort.<sup>15</sup> Gargantuan quantities of North Korean ammunition, disgorged from the reclusive dictatorship's cavernous armories and shuttled by rail to Russia, have then been fed into the maw of the Ukrainian frontlines, with some intelligence estimates suggesting that up to half of all Russian artillery expenditure in 2025 was of North Korean provenance.<sup>16</sup> There are also compelling open-source accounts of Chinese military observers and scientists having been deployed to Russia and maybe even close to the frontlines, where they are tightly conferring with their Russian counterparts on lessons learned from the war in Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, a wide array of democracies, from Denmark

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, "Russian Drone Parts, Made in China," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 01, 2025, available at <https://www.wsj.com/opinion/russia-china-aid-vladimir-putin-ukraine-donald-trump-peace-negotiations-5beda9fa?mod=Searchresults&pos=11&page=1> Daniel Balazs, *China-Russia Dual-Use Cooperation Stays Resilient Amid Sanctions* (Singapore: RSIS, August 2025), available at <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/china-russia-dual-use-cooperation-stays-resilient-amid-sanctions/> *Chinese Dual-Use Exports Help Sustain Russia's War Effort*, (Berlin, Germany: Mercator Institute for China Studies), January 21, 2026, available at <https://merics.org/en/china-russia-dashboard-facts-and-figures-special-relationship>, and "Exclusive: Chinese Engines, Shipped as 'Cooling Units', Power Russian Drones Used in Ukraine," *Reuters*, July 23, 2025, available at <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/chinese-engines-shipped-cooling-units-power-russian-drones-used-ukraine-2025-07-23/>

<sup>16</sup> *International Security and Estonia 2026* (Tallinn, Estonia: Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2026), available at <https://raport.valisluureamet.ee/2026/en/> See also James Kennedy and Molly Carlough, *How North Korea Has Bolstered Russia's War in Ukraine* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2025), available at <https://www.cfr.org/articles/how-north-korea-has-bolstered-russias-war-ukraine>

<sup>17</sup> See "Exclusive: Chinese Drone Experts Worked with Sanctioned Russian Arms Maker," *Reuters*, September 25, 2025, available at <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/chinese-drone-experts-worked-with-sanctioned-russian-arms-maker-sources-say-2025-09-25/>, Anna Frastyvir, "Reuters: Chinese Military Officers Have Been Present Behind Russian Lines with Beijing's Approval," *The Kyiv Independent*, April 12, 2025, available at <https://kyivindependent.com/reuters-chinese-military-officers-have-been-present-behind-russian-lines-with-beijings-approval/> and Warren Murray, "Ukraine War Briefing: Chinese Making Drones in Russia, Zelenskyy Says," *The Guardian*, April 23, 2025, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/apr/23/ukraine-war-briefing-chinese-making-drones-in-russia-zelenskyy-says>

to Australia Japan, South Korea or Great Britain, have supplied Kyiv with varying degrees of financial, military and intelligence support but have (as of now) refused to mirror the direct interventionism of their authoritarian rivals by deploying troops on Ukrainian soil.

## Authoritarian Learners: The Axis Powers, The Soviet Union and the Instrumentalization of Spain

The Spanish Civil War was in many ways a similarly global proxy war, a microcosm of great power rivalry, with outside totalitarian powers—most notably Mussolini's Italy, Stalin's Soviet Union, and Hitler's Germany—treating it both a proxy contest and as a grisly military experiment. At the same time, Salazar's Portugal played a supportive, flanking role not dissimilar to that of Belarus vis-à-vis Russia today, nominally staying out of the war, but providing Nationalist Spanish Forces with extensive logistical support, including munitions and passage across the border, and allowing thousands of its own troops to "volunteer" for the National Cause.<sup>18</sup> When analyzing the dynamics of outside involvement in the Spanish Civil War, there are certainly some parallels to the current situation to the war in Ukraine, most notably in that democracies, fearful of a wider conflagration, refused to deploy troops. In a marked contrast, however, only Mexico supplied arms and ammunition to Republican forces, while France and the United Kingdom remained officially wedded to their painstakingly negotiated, and increasingly Kafkaesque, 27-nation Non-Intervention Agreement—and this even as Axis signatories of the accord brazenly escalated their involvement and murderous brutality on the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, it is unlikely that Franco would have succeeded in the initial stages of his rebellion, were it not for the fateful decision by Hitler to assist him in transporting him, his Moroccan native troops and his battalions of Spanish Foreign Legionaries from their base in North Africa to the Spanish mainland. At the onset of the rebellion, much of the Spanish Navy had remained loyal to the republic, and as a result the Republic had successfully quarantined Franco and his forces in North Africa.<sup>20</sup> The Spanish Nationalist rebels had reached out to both Mussolini and Hitler for aid. After briefly mulling it over one evening following a performance of *Siegfried*, the Fuhrer, decided—in a moment of Wagnerian exaltation (and against the advice of much of his entourage)—to dispatch twenty Junkers-52s in the guise of Lufthansa planes piloted by civilians (in reality Luftwaffe reserve officers), planes that could subsequently be converted into bombers, along with maintenance personnel and six Heinkel He 51 fighter escorts.<sup>21</sup> Franco had already begun using Italian bombers and the few planes he had on hand to start the process of ferrying a few hundred men across the sea. That process was turbocharged,

<sup>18</sup> On the role played by Salazarist Portugal during the Spanish Civil War, see Glyn A. Stone, *Spain, Portugal and the Great Powers, 1931-1941* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). On the importance of the current role played by Belarus, which is often overlooked by the policy community, see Pavlo Rad, *Ukraine-Belarus Relations in the Context of the Russo-Ukrainian War* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2024), available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/ukraine-belarus-relations-context-russo-ukrainian-war> and Artyom Schraibman, *Elements of a Risk Management Strategy Toward Belarus* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025), available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/research/2025/04/russia-belarus-role-new-war>

<sup>19</sup> On Mexico's involvement, see Mario Ojedah Revah, *Mexico and the Spanish Civil War: Domestic Politics and the Republican Cause* (Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> For more details on the oft-neglected maritime dimension to the Spanish Civil War, see Michael Alpert, *The Spanish Civil War at Sea: Dark and Dangerous Waters* (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2021)

<sup>21</sup> For more details on Hitler's decision and the evolution of the Nazi role in Spain, see Robert H. Wheatley, *Hitler and Spain: The Nazi Role in the Spanish Civil War* (Lexington, KS: University of Kentucky Press, 1989), Raymond Proctor, *Hitler's Luftwaffe in the Spanish Civil War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), Carlos Caballero Jurado, *The Condor Legion: German Troops in the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Press, 2002), and Richard J. Evans, "These People are Intolerable: Hitler and Franco," *London Review of Books*, November 05, 2015, available at <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v37/n21/richard-j.-evans/these-people-are-intolerable>

The Spanish Civil War was in many ways a similarly global proxy war, a microcosm of great power rivalry.

The Third Reich engaged in extensive experimentation over the course of the conflict, continuously testing and refining weapon systems and tactics.

however, by the arrival of the Nazi air contingent. In a frenetic ballet of movement, German pilots made up to four flights daily, their lumbering, trimotor aircraft often packed to the gills with twice as many passengers as the officially recommended number.<sup>22</sup> Thus between late July and mid-September 1936, in what constitutes the world's first large-scale military airlift, more than 16,000 troops were shuttled from Morocco onto the Spanish peninsula, along with mountains of heavy equipment.

Over the course of the war, somewhere between 17,000 and 19,000 German soldiers rotated through the infamous Condor Legion, where these supposed "volunteers" were provided with generous salaries, fast-track promotion opportunities, and uniforms with Spanish insignia. Managed out of a secretive Special Staff Section within the German Air Ministry, the Condor Legion, which never numbered more than 6,000 men in-theater, nevertheless played a hugely important role, not only in terms of direct combat support, but also with regard to military instruction, with German officers training thousands of their Francoist counterparts.<sup>23</sup>

The Third Reich engaged in extensive experimentation over the course of the conflict, continuously testing and refining weapon systems and tactics. Over the course of those three years, it wound up employing 27 types of aircraft, with Stuka dive-bombers terrorizing targets in Spain, proving the effectiveness of close air support and precision bombing against battlefield positions. Indeed, the architect of the Condor Legion's horrific bombing campaigns in Northern Spain, Lt. Colonel Wolfram Von Richthofen, who had spent some time as air attaché in Italy, was particularly enraptured with the ideas of the influential airpower theorist Giulio Douhet, and with his focus on crippling enemy morale "*through continuously repeated, concentrated air attacks.*"<sup>24</sup>

Messerschmitt fighters duelled in Spanish skies, giving the Luftwaffe invaluable air combat experience and technical feedback in the years leading up to the battles of France and Britain.<sup>25</sup> Most notably, it led to the development of the *Rotte-Schwarm* (or finger-four) system, whereby Luftwaffe aircraft moved away from the more rigid three-aircraft *Kette* or *Vic* formations, which had initially proved vulnerable to nimble, high-speed Soviet monoplanes, and toward more loosely arranged formations comprised of two pairs (Rotten) of fighters.<sup>26</sup> The Third Reich also developed elaborate bombing strategies combining carpet bombing, incendiary bombing and chain attacks (most notably and infamously at Guernica) which were later used to devastating effect in the opening phases of World War II. Just like Russian drone operators in present-day Ukraine, Nazi pilots would ruthlessly engage in "double-tap" strikes, targeting ambulances and emergency workers in the wake of a first wave of attacks.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See Patrick Turnbull, *The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Press, 1978), and Carlos Caballero Jurado, *The Condor Legion: German Troops in the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Press, 2002), pp.17-18.

<sup>23</sup> See James S. Corum, *The Luftwaffe: Creating the Operational Air War, 1918-1940* (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> See Richard Rhodes, *Hell and Good Company: The Spanish Civil War and the World it Made* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2014), pp.126-128. On the importance of Douhet and other interwar airpower theorists, see David MacIsaac, "Voices From the Central Blue: The Air Power Theorists," in Peter Paret (Ed.) *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp.624-648.

<sup>25</sup> See Karl Ries and Hans Ring, *The Legion Condor: A History of the Luftwaffe in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 1992), and Williamson Murray, *Strategy for Defeat: The Luftwaffe 1933-1945* (Montgomery, AL: Air University Press, 1983), Chapter 1.

<sup>26</sup> See Christopher C. Locksley, "Condor Over Spain: The Civil War, Combat Experience and the Development of Luftwaffe Airpower Doctrine," *Civil Wars*, 2, No.1, 1999, pp.69-99, and James S. Corum, *Legion Condor 1936-39: The Luftwaffe Develops Blitzkrieg in the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> See Vitaly Shevchenko, "Ukraine's Health Supplies Hit in Series of Russian Strikes On Medical Warehouses," *BBC News*, December 12, 2025, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cqllk9qk7vyo> and Hanna Arhirova, "Russia Accused of Targeting Rescue Workers with 'Double Tap' Missile Strike," *PBS News*, August 08, 2023, available at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/russia-accused-of-targeting-rescue-workers-with-double-tap-missile-strike>

As one historian of the Luftwaffe has noted, thanks to its involvement in the Spanish Civil War, by 1939 the Luftwaffe had "more veterans who had participated in a modern air war than any other air force in Western Europe," and "by the end of the Spanish War, many senior Luftwaffe officers, including generals Sperrie, Von Richthofen, and future generals Drum, Plocher, and Seidemann, had all gained recent command experience in a major war."<sup>28</sup> Battle-hardened pilots, often having spent nine-to-twelve month tours in Spain, returned to disseminate their lessons throughout the Luftwaffe, stressing notably the importance of night flying and bad weather navigation, and attaching even greater importance than before to close air support.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to bomber and fighter aircraft, the legion also fielded Panzer I tank companies, cutting-edge signals intelligence units, and anti-aircraft and anti-tank platoons. The diminutive Panzer I tanks, armed with twin heavy machine guns, were quickly revealed as inadequate when confronted by Soviet-Supplied T-26 tanks with their 45mm cannon. Suffering heavy losses in early tank-to-tank engagements, The Third Reich further refined its approach to armored warfare, emphasizing an ever-tighter integration of armor with artillery, anti-tank guns, and infantry.<sup>30</sup> As one historian notes, "the Spanish Civil War reinforced the German Army's conviction that tanks had to operate as part of a combined-arms team, not as independent weapons."<sup>31</sup> The future emphasis on Panzer divisions as balanced formations incorporating motorized infantry, self-propelled artillery, and engineers therefore owed something to the Spanish experience. From a more technical perspective, the conflict also accelerated the development of heavier armored and armed tanks, such as the Panzer III and IV, while demonstrating the effectiveness of German anti-tank guns, such as the 37mm Pak 36, against Soviet tanks.<sup>32</sup>

Mussolini's Italy, for its part, deployed a far larger — but arguably much less effective — body of troops. Indeed, it is estimated that more than 80,000 Italian soldiers served across the Iberian Peninsula during the Spanish Civil War, with entire divisions remaining in theater for extended periods, limiting the diffusion of experience throughout the broader military.<sup>33</sup> Italian bombers and Fiat fighters also saw extensive action, albeit often with mixed results. Meanwhile, Italian infantry experimented with new operational concepts, such as the concept of "guerra celere" or "lightning war", which had emerged in Italian doctrinal writings in the late 1920s and early 1930s. *Guerra celere* envisioned highly mobile operations combining motorized and mechanized forces with tactical airpower to achieve rapid breakthrough and exploitation. It demanded, however, both far more heavily armored tanks (the principal Italian

<sup>28</sup> James S. Corum, *The Luftwaffe: Creating the Operational Air War, 1918-1940* (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 1997), p.220.

<sup>29</sup> James S. Corum thus argues that "the success of the Luftwaffe close air support operations in Spain directly influenced the plans for the Polish campaign of 1939." See James S. Corum, *The Luftwaffe: Creating the Operational Air War, 1918-1940* (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 1997), p.223.

<sup>30</sup> See Manfred Messerschmidt, "Foreign Policy and the Preparation for War," in Wilhelm Deist et al. (Eds.) *Germany and the Second World War: Volume I: The Build-Up of German Aggression* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2015), Part IV.

<sup>31</sup> See Steven J. Zaloga, *Spanish Civil War Tanks: The Proving Ground for Blitzkrieg* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2010), pp. 26-28.

<sup>32</sup> See Thomas L. Jentz, *Panzertruppen: The Complete Guide to the Creation and Combat Employment of Germany's Tank Force, 1933-1942* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 1996), pp.83-85, and Williamson Murray, "Armored Warfare: the British, French and German Experiences," in Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett (Eds.) *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.32-34.

<sup>33</sup> On the Italian Army during this period, see John F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), MacGregor Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940-1943* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Brian R. Sullivan, "The Italian Armed Forces, 1918-1940," in Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray (Eds.) *Military Effectiveness, Volume II: The Interwar Period* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), and John Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922-1940* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

"The Spanish Civil War reinforced the German Army's conviction that tanks had to operate as part of a combined-arms team, not as independent weapons."

tank or "tankette" of the period was the L3/33 inferior even to the Panzer I) and organizational capabilities that the *Regio Esercito* lacked, most notably flexible combined arms coordination, robust logistics, resilient junior leadership, and units capable of rapidly adapting when plans went awry.

This was made most cruelly evident during the battle of Guadalajara in May 1937, when Italian motorized advances succumbed to ferocious Republican counterattacks, in part due to the muddy, waterlogged terrain, and in part because modern Republican aircraft (mostly the latest Soviet fighters and bombers flown by Soviet pilots) repeatedly struck at their logistics lines and the reserve formations.<sup>34</sup> When reading about the battle of Guadalajara, it is hard not to be reminded of certain key chapters in the ongoing war in Ukraine, and more specifically the failure of Russia's initial invasion. Like Mussolini's forces in 1937, Russia's 2022 rush toward Kyiv suffered from glaring combined-arms failures: tank columns dashed ahead without adequate infantry screening or air cover, leading to ambushes by small Ukrainian teams armed with portable anti-tank missiles. The now-famous carnage of Russian armored convoys on the approaches to Kyiv – burned-out hulks strewn along roads and in suburban towns – mirrored, in a way, the eviscerated Italian tankettes on the muddy fields of Guadalajara. Poor reconnaissance, underestimation of enemy capabilities, and logistical breakdowns stalled the Russians, much as similar factors foiled certain early Nationalist assaults in Spain.

Unlike Nazi Germany, the Italian military establishment proved remarkably resistant to learning. As one historian notes, the Italian officer corps exhibited an almost "systematic incapacity for realistic self-assessment."<sup>35</sup> Part of this was due to the Italian regime's heavy emphasis on the propaganda value of certain military operations over their tactical effectiveness. Mussolini's own warped and sanguinary ideology, which believed that "*immersion in (...) violence was the only way to forge the spirit of the new Fascist man*" and that Italian troops needed to be hardened or "blooded" in the Spanish theater—even at the cost of prematurely conceived or executed offensive operations--no doubt also played a role.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, the byzantine politics of the Italian military—with its viciously competing power centers in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Fascist militia—only entrenched this widespread reluctance to acknowledge any severe deficiencies, further impeding the production of honest, unvarnished after-action reports. Whereas Germany had inherited a longstanding General Staff tradition which systematically studied military operations and translated observations into doctrines and procurement, Italy had dismantled its General Staff following unification, and interwar reforms had failed to create a comparable analytical capability. Combat reports from Spain were thus sometimes filed, but never triaged or dissected in a systematic fashion. The consequences of these various organizational and ideational pathologies were to become more visible in 1940-1941, when Italian Forces in the Mediterranean exhibited precisely the same deficiencies in combined arms, coordination, logistics, and tactical flexibility that Spain had exposed three years earlier.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> On the battle of Guadalajara, the best English-language treatment probably remains John F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp.205-260 in particular.

<sup>35</sup> MacGregor Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940-1943* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.27.

<sup>36</sup> For "immersion in violence," see Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (London, UK: Harper Collins, 2006), p.155.

<sup>37</sup> On Fascist Italy's later lack of operational prowess, see MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939-1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and John Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922-1940* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Like Mussolini's forces in 1937, Russia's 2022 rush toward Kyiv suffered from glaring combined-arms failures.

The Soviet Union, which supported the Republicans for a portion of the war had a lighter military footprint than the fascists, especially in terms of boots on the ground, with an estimated 2 to 3,000 Soviet military personnel and advisors serving in Spain over the course of the conflict.<sup>38</sup> While Soviet military assistance waned over time, it nevertheless proved critical in helping the Republic stave off an early defeat in the early months of the war. Just as Western-supplied Javelin missiles and HIMARS rockets would much later help Ukraine blunt a larger aggressor, Soviet tanks and aircraft gave the Spanish loyalists an initial fighting chance against Franco's well-funded and aided rebellion. When it comes to the USSR's operational learning, however, the picture is somewhat more mixed. Indeed, while the Soviet Union did extract some value from its Spanish intervention, deep-rooted institutional pathologies prevented the Red Army from matching German effectiveness in translating combat experience into doctrinal and organizational improvement.

On the ground, the USSR introduced the T-26 light tank, one of the most advanced tanks of its day, into Spain's battles. Soviet tank crews, some under Commander Dmitry Pavlov, helped the Republic use these T-26s and BT-series fast tanks in combat for the first time, gleaned lessons about armor design. In effect, historians have noted that the Red Army's later development of the famed T-34 medium tank was informed by the shortcomings observed in Spanish battles – such as inadequate armor and firepower on the T-26 when faced with German 37mm anti-tank guns.<sup>39</sup> The fighter and bomber aircraft it provided initially provided the Republicans to effectively compete in the air—the I-16 Mosca fighter, for example, was initially superior to the German and Italian fighters, until it was surpassed by the introduction of the Messerschmitt. Aerial tactics also advanced: Soviet aviators pioneered night bombing techniques in Spain, flying harassment raids in darkness, a tactic they would refine and employ on a larger scale against the Nazis after 1941.

At the same time, however, Soviet operational learning also proved tragically incomplete—especially with regard to armor doctrine. Soviet observers initially correctly identified that tanks dispersed in infantry support roles suffered heavy losses and achieved only limited results, proving unable to punch through enemy lines. These on-the-ground assessments should have bolstered the arguments of theorists such as Marshal Mikhail Tukhachvesky, who advocated large, independent mechanized formations capable of deep thrusts.<sup>40</sup> Instead, the opposite occurred, with the so-called "Great Purge," which reached its grim paroxysm in 1937-38, devastating the Red Army's senior leadership and temporarily chilling any desire among officers to produce any intellectually bold or rigorous analysis.<sup>41</sup> When Tukhachvesky was executed in June 1937, the coterie of deep battle analysts associated with him were also brutally purged. Spanish veterans returning to the Soviet Union fell under deep suspicion, with their extended time overseas now often being viewed, first and foremost, as potential vectors for ideological contamination. As a result, by the end of the Spanish Civil War, the parts of the Soviet military ecosystem which might have best processed Spanish lessons learned had either been intellectually neutered or violently dismantled. In 1939, large, mechanized formations were disbanded, and tanks were distributed among infantry divisions in precisely the dispersed configuration that Spain had shown to be ineffective. This unfortunate doctrinal regression reflected not so much an ignorance of Spanish lessons learned, but rather a form

<sup>38</sup> On the Soviet Union's involvement in the Spanish Civil War, see Daniel Kowalsky, *Stalin and the Spanish Civil War* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004), and Yuri Rybalkin, "Soviet Military Assistance to Republican Spain," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 7, No.3, 1994, pp.536-540.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel Kowalsky, *Stalin and the Spanish Civil War* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp.185-190.

<sup>40</sup> See Mary Habeck, *Storm of Steel: The Development of Armor Doctrine in Germany and the Soviet Union, 1919-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp.226-228.

<sup>41</sup> On this, see Roger R. Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers: A Social History of the Red Army, 1925-1941* (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 1996), pp.130-136.

Soviet operational learning also proved tragically incomplete—especially with regard to armor doctrine.

of voluntary amnesia—one tied to the political impossibility of openly advocating positions now inextricably tied to purged “enemies of the people.” As one well-known historian of the Red Army observes, the purges temporarily destroyed the Soviet Union’s “*capacity for critical self-analysis at precisely the moment when that capacity was most needed.*”<sup>42</sup>

## Ukraine as Proving Ground: North Korea, China and a Russian Army Under Duress

Just like during the Spanish Civil War, Ukraine has functioned for several contemporary authoritarian regimes as a blood-spattered proving ground—an arena for training, adaptation, and weapons experimentation—while Western and Asian democracies, standing short of direct belligerency, must reckon with the disquieting prospect that some of their adversaries may emerge from the conflict far more battle-hardened, tactically adept, and technologically seasoned.

Take the example of North Korea, for example, which few observers in 2022 would have anticipated would play such an active role in Ukraine. In addition to plying their Russian partners with huge quantities of ammunition and large numbers of ballistic missiles, North Korean forces have been deployed in large numbers (roughly 15,000 men) to the Russo-Ukrainian front. Whereas these troops were initially tasked with relatively straightforward “human wave” style assaults on Ukrainian positions—something which they reportedly engaged in with fanatical fervor—their operational mandate has since widened in accordance with their level of (Russia-provided) training and combat experience.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, North Korean troops now engage in a variety of military activities with varying degrees of complexity: from demining to cross-border MLRS (multiple launcher rocket systems) and artillery strikes, and reconnaissance drone operations. North Korea’s mercurial dictator Kim Jong-Un, like Mussolini in the late 1930s, clearly views the world’s most vicious proxy war as a rare opportunity to train and harden his troops. In effect, over the decades, there have been a number of well-documented instances when the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) chose to send troops abroad for combat experience—from North Vietnam to the Middle East or Africa.<sup>44</sup> Deeply paranoid and perennially on a war footing, the regime in Pyongyang has long sought to expose parts of its military to real combat or crisis conditions; and in this sense the high-intensity, technologically iterative war in Ukraine represents an extraordinary potential for battlefield learning that the DPRK could not easily obtain elsewhere. In addition to closely observing how elements drawn from its arsenal—from rockets to missiles—perform against Western-sourced air defense systems, North Korean troops have thus been steadily accumulating precious experience in increasingly sophisticated technologies and tactics—from electronic warfare (EW) and signals intelligence to drone forward observation and target designation, to counter-air and air defense targeting. In private conversations with this author, South Korean

<sup>42</sup> David M. Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War* (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 1998), p.34.

<sup>43</sup> See Dasl Yoon, “North Korean Soldiers Provide More Advanced Support for Russia’s War on Ukraine,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 06, 2026, available at [https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/north-korean-soldiers-provide-more-advanced-support-for-russias-war-on-ukraine-f3c9f92?gaa\\_at=eafs&gaa\\_n=AWETSqdlW3\\_Ls-Bflrq7ELJNc10jbx7zaTkysRqslB8qwsbc8s3UopMAivxwO2rN20%3D&gaa\\_ts=698cddb8&gaa\\_sig=wqSxHXahghLiLxV6t0RjH\\_74f1N96lXeUQ7FqIKeSTh-WjCEXKJHuuBdWJLHxRPq4vAvCQ-jeltoKE-4JeTOnlg%3D%3D](https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/north-korean-soldiers-provide-more-advanced-support-for-russias-war-on-ukraine-f3c9f92?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=AWETSqdlW3_Ls-Bflrq7ELJNc10jbx7zaTkysRqslB8qwsbc8s3UopMAivxwO2rN20%3D&gaa_ts=698cddb8&gaa_sig=wqSxHXahghLiLxV6t0RjH_74f1N96lXeUQ7FqIKeSTh-WjCEXKJHuuBdWJLHxRPq4vAvCQ-jeltoKE-4JeTOnlg%3D%3D)

<sup>44</sup> See Charles K. Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World, 1950-1992* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015), Bruce E. Bechtol Jr. *North Korean Proliferation in the Middle East and Africa* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas press, 2018), and Merle Pribbenow, *North Korean Pilots in the Skies Over Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center North Korea International Documentation Project, 2011), available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/north-korean-pilots-the-skies-over-vietnam>

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defense experts and officials have expressed their mounting concern over the longer-term ramifications of this experiential leap for North Korea's armed forces. Indeed, there is already evidence of a concerted process of diffusion underway, with reports that roughly 3,000 North Korean veterans have returned home to serve as military instructors.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, Pyongyang appears to be drawing certain broader technological lessons from the war in Ukraine by—among other things—investing heavily in the mass production of small tactical UAVs and loitering munitions.<sup>46</sup>

While the People's Republic of China (PRC) is not a direct co-belligerent in the war in Ukraine, it has become a decisive enabler of Russia's war effort, providing the sclerotic Putinist regime with a vital economic lifeline, and—perhaps even more importantly—with close to 80% of the dual-use materials or components that have enabled it to sustain its defense industrial base.<sup>47</sup> There is also growing evidence that China has deployed a large number of military observers and engineers in its own veiled bid to engage in in-theater learning, and that it may have been providing intelligence and targeting support—to include satellite-based intelligence—to Russian forces.<sup>48</sup> This has been occurring against a broader, more visible backdrop of intensified Sino-Russian military cooperation worldwide—from Asia to Alaska—with both autocracies now regularly engaging in joint maritime and bomber patrols, and Russian forces helping to train their Chinese counterparts in the kind of large-scale airborne insertion operations that might be required in a Taiwan-related contingency.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, the PRC's vibrant defense-intellectual community has been poring over the broader technological, tactical and strategic lessons to be derived from the war in Ukraine. Chinese analysts and defense scholars have thus focused on the growing ubiquity of low-cost asymmetric capabilities (and on the associated need for the PRC to develop viable countermeasures), on the importance of rapid, more iterative forms frontline military and technological adaptation, and on what they have begun to term "avatar warfare", i.e. a new, more involved form of proxy war whereby technologically advanced great power adversaries (i.e. the United States) can greatly enhance a smaller partner's combat effectiveness by furnishing them with exquisite real-time intelligence and "getting into their neural system."<sup>50</sup> Finally,

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<sup>45</sup> Dasl Yoon, "North Korean Soldiers Provide More Advanced Support for Russia's War on Ukraine," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 06, 2026, available at [https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/north-korean-soldiers-provide-more-advanced-support-for-russias-war-on-ukraine-f3c9bf92?gaa\\_at=eafs&gaa\\_n=AWETsqdLW3\\_Ls-Bflrq7ELJNc10jbx7zaTkysRqslB8qwsbc8s3UopMAivxwO2rN20%3D&gaa\\_ts=698cd8b8&gaa\\_sig=wqSxHXahghLiLxV6t0RjH\\_74f1N96IXeUQ7FqIKeSTh-WjCEXKJHuuBdWJLHxRPq4vAvCQ-jeltoKE-4JeTOnlg%3D%3D](https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/north-korean-soldiers-provide-more-advanced-support-for-russias-war-on-ukraine-f3c9bf92?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=AWETsqdLW3_Ls-Bflrq7ELJNc10jbx7zaTkysRqslB8qwsbc8s3UopMAivxwO2rN20%3D&gaa_ts=698cd8b8&gaa_sig=wqSxHXahghLiLxV6t0RjH_74f1N96IXeUQ7FqIKeSTh-WjCEXKJHuuBdWJLHxRPq4vAvCQ-jeltoKE-4JeTOnlg%3D%3D)

<sup>46</sup> See "Kim Jong Un Said to Order Mass Production of Suicide Drones," *Reuters*, November 14, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-leader-kim-orders-mass-production-suicide-drones-yonhap-says-2024-11-14/> Jonathan Corrado, Chelsie Alexandre and Anton Ponomarenko, "North Korea's Deadly Drone Bonanza Is Coming to a Peninsula Near You," *War on the Rocks*, July 22, 2025, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2025/07/north-koreas-deadly-drone-bonanza-is-coming-to-a-peninsula-near-you/> and Kim Soo-Yeon, "N. Korea's Kim Oversees Performance Test of Tactical Attack Drones," *Yonhap News*, September 19, 2025, available at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250919001100315>

<sup>47</sup> See the remarks made by US State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce, quoted in Francois Diaz-Maurin, "What Were Chinese Soldiers Doing in Ukraine?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, April 09, 2025, available at <https://thebulletin.org/2025/04/what-were-chinese-soldiers-doing-in-ukraine/>

<sup>48</sup> Erin Bianco and Jonathan Landay, "Chinese Nationals Fighting for Russia are Mercenaries-US Officials," *Reuters*, April 11, 2025, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/05/19/russia-nato-war-putin-ukraine-nuclear-strategy-baltics/> and Olesia Safranova, "Ukraine Says Chinese Satellites May be Aiding Russian Attacks," *Bloomberg*, December 24, 2025, available at <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=chinese+satellite+intelligence+russian+forces+ukraine&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>

<sup>49</sup> See Oleksandr V. Danylyuk and Jack Watling, "How Russia is Helping China Prepare to Seize Taiwan," *RUSI*, September 26, 2025, available at <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/how-russia-helping-china-prepare-seize-taiwan>

<sup>50</sup> See Jake Rinaldi, "PLA Learning from Modern Protracted Wars Abroad," in Joshua Arostegui (Ed.) *The 2024 Carlisle Conference on the PLA* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, 2026), pp.49-65.

the overriding importance of mass production in a high-intensity conflict such as the one currently raging in Ukraine appears to have bolstered Beijing's confidence in its own ability to prevail in the event of a protracted war with the United States, with PLA-affiliated researchers assessing that China's greater capacity for industrial production and large-scale, whole-of-society mobilization would lend it certain key competitive advantages.<sup>51</sup>

Last but not least, how might one cursorily characterize what the Russians themselves have learnt from their fateful—and thus far abortive—attempt to wholly absorb and/or subjugate Ukraine? Four years have now passed since the invasion, and a savagely mauled Russian military has been forced into a series of adaptations across doctrine, tactics, and force structure—adaptations that reveal both the plasticity and persistent limitations of the armed forces inherited from the Soviet era. While early failures exposed deep structural pathologies, Russia has demonstrated a capacity for incremental learning that some Western analysts were perhaps overly slow to credit—and which has accelerated in ways now beginning to have measurable strategic consequences.<sup>52</sup> Yet as one analysis recently observed, Putin is caught in something of a vice of his own making: the chances are waning that his armies will produce something he can call victory, and the costs of continuing to generate combat strength risk hollowing out Russia itself.<sup>53</sup>

The most significant early adaptation concerned command and control. The initial invasion relied on a centralized, overly rigid operational design that proved catastrophically brittle when faced with Ukrainian resistance and logistical collapse. Following the failures around Kyiv and Kherson, Russian forces shifted toward more decentralized tactical decision-making, empowering company and battalion commanders to exercise greater initiative—a meaningful, if partial, departure from a command culture historically resistant to junior-level autonomy. Yet as experts such as Michael Kofman have noted, and notwithstanding these adaptations, Russia's overall combat efficiency has not commensurately improved; the Russian army remains better at learning individual lessons than at translating them into decisive operational results.<sup>54</sup>

Artillery employment also evolved considerably. Russia entered the war relying heavily on unobserved, massed fire, but Ukrainian counter-battery operations forced significant changes. Russian units integrated small unmanned aerial systems for fire adjustment, compressing the sensor-to-shooter cycle and improving accuracy. One observer, drawing on multiple visits to Ukraine, describes the emergence of what Ukrainian commanders call a "new battle triangle," with intelligence, operations, and drones and electronic warfare at its three points—a framework Russia has increasingly mastered.<sup>55</sup> The front line is now so saturated with drones that vehicle movement within fifteen kilometers is effectively impossible, forcing infantry to march to their positions on foot.

<sup>51</sup> See Howard Zhang and Brett Zakheim, *China's Lessons from the Russia-Ukraine War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2025), available at [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3141-4.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3141-4.html)

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Dara Massicot, "How Russia Recovered: What the Kremlin is Learning from the War in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, October 08, 2025, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/how-russia-recovered>

<sup>53</sup> "Vladimir Putin is Caught in a Vice of His Own Making," *The Economist*, February 19, 2026, available at <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2026/02/19/vladimir-putin-is-caught-in-a-vice-of-his-own-making>

<sup>54</sup> Michael Kofman, "Ukraine's War of Endurance," *Foreign Affairs*, February 16, 2026, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/ukraines-war-endurance>

<sup>55</sup> Mick Ryan, *Seven Contemporary Insights on the State of the Ukraine War* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2025), available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/seven-contemporary-insights-state-ukraine-war>

A savagely mauled Russian military has been forced into a series of adaptations across doctrine, tactics, and force structure.

The war has revealed a Russian army capable of learning under duress while remaining constrained by systemic problems.

Russian drone production has since become one of the most strategically significant industrial developments of the conflict. Having initially lagged Ukraine in indigenous capability and relying heavily on Iranian-supplied Shahed systems, Russia redirected substantial state resources toward a domestic UAV industrial base.<sup>56</sup> As close observers of Russia's military have observed, Moscow has refined the ability of its unmanned systems operators to hunt and kill Ukrainian soldiers and civilians, with drone units evolving from research organizations into operational units whose tactical know-how Russia's military leadership has then sought to diffuse and replicate across the force.<sup>57</sup> The vehicle for this transformation has been the so-called "Rubicon units," which appear to have fundamentally transformed Russian drone operations by standardizing procedures across the front, enabling rapid innovation, and systematically sharing lessons between formations.<sup>58</sup> Russian tactics have evolved in parallel: Ukrainian commanders describe "1,000 cuts" tactics, in which small teams of two to four soldiers exploit gaps in Ukrainian positions that can be up to 1,000 meters apart and generally lack depth, with glide bombs or Shahed drones used to create gaps where none exist.<sup>59</sup>

Force generation has exposed the deepest structural weaknesses. After suffering unexpectedly grievous material and human losses, Russia pursued a multi-track regeneration strategy — refurbishing equipment from storage, purchasing ammunition from North Korea and Iran, and offering lucrative incentives to volunteer soldiers — growing the military from roughly 900,000 personnel before the invasion to around 1.3 million by 2025.<sup>60</sup> However, by December 2025, it would appear that unrecoverable casualties have once again begun to exceed monthly recruitment, which has also dipped. Russia's armed forces are thus "preserving equipment but suffering much larger losses of manpower," and the trend in manpower availability has become increasingly negative.<sup>61</sup> At this point in time, this dynamic appears potentially self-defeating: if Putin continues to attempt to generate more combat strength at this pace, the cost may be a hollowing out of Russian society and economy that produces its own set of internal crises.

What remains uncertain, and beyond the more modest remit of this paper, is whether Russia's adaptations constitute genuine institutional learning (akin to the Luftwaffe during the Spanish Civil War) or simply battlefield pragmatism unlikely to survive into peacetime doctrine (like the Soviet army of the late 1930s). In short, the war has revealed a Russian army capable of learning under duress while remaining constrained by systemic problems in logistics, inter-service coordination, and officer professionalism — and by a manpower arithmetic that no amount of tactical ingenuity can indefinitely offset.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Sonne and Kim Barker, "Russia Made Drone Production a Supreme Priority. Now it Swarms the Skies," *The New York Times*, September 14, 2025, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/14/world/europe/russia-ukraine-drone-attacks-production.html>

<sup>57</sup> See Dara Massicot, "How Russia Recovered: What the Kremlin is Learning from the War in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, October 08, 2025, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/how-russia-recovered> and Mark Krutov, Sergei Dobrynin and Yauhen Lehalau, "Inside Rubicon, The Elite Russian Drone Unit Wreaking Havoc on Ukraine's Troops," *Radio Free Europe*, September 17, 2025, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-drone-rubicon-secret-ukraine-war/33532804.html>

<sup>58</sup> Yuri Lapaiev, "Crossing the Rubicon: Russia's Elite Drone Force and the Evolution of Unmanned Warfare in Ukraine," *The Saratoga Foundation*, February 05, 2026, available at <https://www.saratoga-foundation.org/p/crossing-the-rubicon-russias-elite>

<sup>59</sup> Sebastian Seibt, "How Russia's Thousand Cuts Tactics is Straining Ukraine's Frontline Forces," *France 24*, February 24, 2026, available at <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20260224-how-russia-thousand-cuts-tactic-is-straining-ukraine-frontline-forces>

<sup>60</sup> Dara Massicot, *Russian Military Reconstitution: 2030 Pathways and Prospects* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024), pp.8-14.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Kofman, "Ukraine's War of Endurance," *Foreign Affairs*, February 16, 2026, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/ukraines-war-endurance>

## Between Misinterpretation and Dismissal: The Challenge of Drawing The Right Military Lessons

*"It is the old story of guns versus armor again. Some new invention gives the one a temporary superiority, which is in a few years nullified by further improvements in the other. So the seesaw continues. A new gas, a new gun, a ray of some extraordinary power or an artificial fog on a large scale may swing the balance once more in favor of the attack. But such an invention is apparently not yet in sight. Meanwhile we may fairly say that the war in Spain has confirmed the view that recent developments in warfare have tended to strengthen the defense."*

Major-General A.C. Temperley, Military Correspondent of the London Daily Telegraph, in Major-General A.C. Temperley, "Military Lessons of the Spanish War," Foreign Affairs, October 01, 1937, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/spain/1937-10-01/military-lessons-spanish-war>

*"This is a civil war in which methods are necessarily different from those of a war between nations. Therefore, it is very important to avoid trying to derive from this war lessons of general application. Conditions are different, the scale of armament is different, the objectives striven for are different from those which we should be seeking in any war in which we are likely to be engaged."*

PRO, AIR 2/3289, 'Report on Visit of Air Attachés to Nationalist Spain, 13–24 April 1938', Letter from Group Captain D. Colyer, British Air Attaché in Paris, to Sir Robert Hodgson, British Agent to Franco's government in Burgos.

Restraint imposes an experiential disadvantage relative to authoritarian rivals willing to pay for operational knowledge in blood.

In one important respect, the position of Western democracies vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine mirrors their stance during the Spanish Civil War: in neither conflict are they co-belligerents, and in both cases that restraint imposes an experiential disadvantage relative to authoritarian rivals willing to pay for operational knowledge in blood. This parallel, however, obscures a consequential difference—the depth of Western involvement in Ukraine, encompassing sustained materiel transfers, intelligence fusion, and large-scale training, has created learning opportunities of a richness that the timid non-intervention policies of the late 1930s entirely foreclosed.

What follows examines each episode in turn—first the signal failures of interwar lesson-drawing from Spain, then the more deliberate, if still imperfect, efforts of contemporary Western militaries to extract operational knowledge from Ukraine. Both cases, separated by nearly ninety years, speak to the same underlying problem: that military bureaucracies tend to learn selectively, filtering battlefield evidence through doctrinal preconceptions and strategic circumstances that can just as easily distort a lesson as transmit it. Taken together, both cases illuminate a challenge that is as much institutional as it is intellectual: not merely the difficulty of learning from others' wars, but of drawing the right lessons for the right theater before the moment of their application has passed. If the Ukraine war—like the Spanish Civil War before it—is a "precursor" conflict for a future, even more cataclysmic great power confrontation,

one can only hope that today's defense policy analysts will not suffer from the same cognitive biases and analytical shortcomings as their interwar forebears.<sup>62</sup>

## Observers Without Pupils: Britain, France, the United States and Civil War Spain

Although France, Great Britain and the United States abided by a policy of non-intervention and deployed no troops in Spain, they remained fully cognizant of the fact that the war constituted an operational laboratory of extraordinary complexity and richness—one which heralded not only new ways of war, but also pioneered transformational advances in field medicine.<sup>63</sup> Between 1936 and 1939, modern aircraft, tanks, artillery, and combined-arms formations were tested under genuine combat conditions, and European civilian populations were subjected to aerial bombing campaigns of an unprecedented ferocity. Population resiliency levels and military tactics were meticulously scrutinized by military attachés, intelligence officers, and volunteer participants from across Europe and North America, and then widely discussed—and sometimes ferociously debated—in the press.<sup>64</sup> That the United States, Britain, and France drew so few durable military lessons from this experience is therefore not primarily a story of intelligence failure—indeed the information was available—but rather of institutional rigidity, doctrinal precommitment, and the selective reading of ambiguous evidence to confirm existing assumptions. There was also—as with some contemporary commentary on the war in Ukraine—a marked tendency to dismiss the lessons of the Spanish Civil War as insufficiently generalizable, with venerable military commentators occasionally scoffing that the war was too localized, small-scale, or poorly conducted to be of use to Western military strategists planning for wars conducted on a more epic, and geographically sprawling, scale. This sentiment was frequently relayed by figures such as the famed British military theorist JFC Fuller, who in his much-read reports and dispatches from Spain, dismissed the conflict as “a war from which not much of a tactical nature is to be learnt,” before later adding “I do not think we have much to learn from either tanks or anti-tank weapons in this war, because the basis of tactics is training, and this is mainly a war of untrained men with a sprinkling of foreign mercenaries who naturally think of their own skins first.”<sup>65</sup>

Less influential but perhaps less reductionist British military observers did, in fact, file a series of detailed reports throughout the conflict, and the War Office processed them with evident attention. The problem lay not so much in collection, however, but in interpretation. Republican armored forces, equipped primarily with Soviet T-26 tanks, were frequently defeated—at Seseña in October 1936, at Fuentes de Ebro in 1937—and British observers drew from these setbacks the lesson that tanks operating without adequate infantry support were inherently vulnerable. This was not inherently wrong. The Republican employment of armor was, indeed, frequently haphazard, or amateurish: tanks were committed piecemeal, without coordinated artillery preparation or proper radio communications.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>62</sup> For three excellent studies from the rich academic literature on the intellectual and organizational challenges tied to drawing the right lessons learned from either past or foreign wars, see Janine Davidson, *Lifting the Fog of Peace: How Americans Learned to Fight Modern War* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), Thomas Manhen, *Uncovering Ways of War: US Intelligence and Foreign Military Innovation, 1918-1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), and Brent L. Sterling, *Other People's Wars: The US Military and the Challenge of Learning From Foreign Conflicts* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021).

<sup>63</sup> For example, in methods of blood transfusion and in sealing compound fractures in plaster. For more on this little-known aspect of the Spanish Civil War, see Richard Rhodes, *Hell and Good Company: The Spanish Civil War and the World it Made* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Paul Preston, *We Saw Spain Die: Foreign Correspondents in the Spanish Civil War* (New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2009).

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Nestor Cerda, “The Road to Dunkirk: British Intelligence and the Spanish Civil War,” *War in History*, 13, No.1, 2006, p.11.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Brian Bond, *British Military Policy Between the Two Wars* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp.221-226.

Population resiliency levels and military tactics were meticulously scrutinized by military attachés, intelligence officers, and volunteer participants.

The British Army's conventional wisdom led to a continued underinvestment in the organizational and communications architecture of armored divisions.

What British observers failed, however, to register was the corrective implication of their own diagnosis. If armor failed when unsupported, the answer was not to limit confidence in armor but to develop the doctrine and communications infrastructure that would enable it to operate effectively with infantry and artillery. This was precisely the lesson the Germans drew from their own Condor Legion experience and from observation of Soviet tank employment. The British War Office instead read Spain as broadly confirming the defensive primacy of the anti-tank gun and the limited offensive utility of armored formations—a conclusion that reinforced the institutional conservatism of an army still dominated by officers whose formative experience was the attritional warfare of 1914–1918.<sup>67</sup> By and large, the British Army's conventional wisdom led to a continued underinvestment in the organizational and communications architecture of armored divisions, deficiencies that would subsequently prove catastrophic during the Battle of France. British observers were somewhat more alert to the lessons of anti-tank defense. The performance of Republican anti-tank guns against Nationalist armor, and the vulnerability of tanks to coordinated infantry-gun combinations, was carefully noted. The War Office accelerated procurement of the two-pounder anti-tank gun on the basis of Spanish experience, and this represented a genuine, if modest, institutional learning.<sup>68</sup>

In the air, London's lessons were shaped as much by public anxiety as by operational analysis. The bombing of Madrid, Barcelona, and Guernica confirmed the pre-existing assumption—rooted in Douhetian theory and epitomized in Stanley Baldwin's famously fatalistic observation that "*the bomber would always get through*"—that strategic bombing could break civilian morale and that no effective defense against massed bomber formations was possible.<sup>69</sup> This conclusion was simultaneously overstated and strategically paralyzing. As one historian has noted,

*In many respects, the press' sensationalized reporting of the bombing of Guernica worked to the advantage of Hitler's regime prior to the outbreak of World War II. People throughout the world received the impression that the Germans had created a fearsome air force that could obliterate entire cities—forgetting that Guernica was not a city but a small town. In reality, the Luftwaffe of 1937 was incapable of leveling a large city, nor had the Germans incorporated city-busting into their doctrine. However, the British and French governments saw the example of Guernica and assumed that the Germans were looking toward a city-bombing strategy in future war. (...) As Harold Macmillan remarked, "We thought of air warfare in 1938 rather as people think of nuclear warfare today." (...) The British, French, and the Czechs were all terrified by the idea of Prague, London, or Paris becoming another Guernica.<sup>70</sup>*

In reality, the Republican defense of Madrid in 1936–1937 had in fact demonstrated that determined fighter interception, organized around adequate warning systems, could substantially degrade bombing effectiveness—a finding that pointed directly toward the integrated air defense architecture the RAF was already developing through the Dowding system.<sup>71</sup> In addition, other British observers had pointed to the unexpected resiliency of Spanish civilian populations subjected to bombardment—but these analyses were often shunted to the sidelines in favor of more dramatic or sensationalistic coverage.

<sup>67</sup> See David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War Against Germany, 1919-1945* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.55-60.

<sup>68</sup> See the discussion in Major-General I.S.O Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East: Volume I* (London, UK: HMSO, 1954), pp.14-15, and Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (London, UK: Castle Books, 1960), p.22.

<sup>69</sup> This is well covered in Uri Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber: The Fear of Air Attack and British Politics, 1932-1939* (London, UK: London Historical Society, 1980).

<sup>70</sup> James S. Corum, *The Luftwaffe: Creating the Operational Air War, 1918-1940* (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 1997), p.200.

<sup>71</sup> For an excellent, albeit technical, history of the evolution of British air defense during the interwar years, see David Zimmerman, *Britain's Shield: Radar and the Defeat of the Luftwaffe* (Cirencester, UK: Sutton Publishing, 2001).

The RAF did draw some useful technical lessons, however, from Spain regarding aircraft performance. The encounters between the Heinkel He 51, the Fiat CR.32, and Soviet I-15 and I-16 fighters provided data on maneuverability, climb rates, and the relative merits of biplane and monoplane configurations that accelerated British confidence in the Hurricane and Spitfire programs.<sup>72</sup> Yet the broader doctrinal implications of Spain—that air superiority required systematic ground-controlled interception rather than offensive sweeps, and that close air support of ground forces demanded new communications and liaison procedures—were only imperfectly absorbed.<sup>73</sup> The RAF remained profoundly wedded to the independent strategic bombing mission, and the development of close air support doctrine languished until operational necessity forced its improvisation after 1940.

French military observers were, in certain respects, more finetuned to ongoing developments than their British counterparts, and the lessons they drew were in some areas more technically precise. French attachés documented the value of anti-tank artillery integrated with infantry positions and noted the operational problems created by inadequate radio communications in armored units—a finding consistent with the conclusions of French armor advocates like then-Colonel Charles de Gaulle, who had argued before the war for concentrated mechanized formations capable of independent operational maneuver.<sup>74</sup>

The tragedy of the French case was that the lessons were, to a certain degree, learned at the level of tactical observation but then institutionally neutralized by the broader organizational framework into which they were inserted. The French army's devout commitment to methodical battle—*la bataille conduite*—meant that the Spanish evidence of mobile, combined-arms warfare was processed through a conceptual filter that emphasized defensive consolidation and centralized control. Evidence of armor's potential for rapid exploitation was acknowledged but deemed exceptional, the product of the particular conditions of a civil war rather than a model for interstate conflict between organized modern armies.<sup>75</sup> French analysts noted, as did the British, that the small numbers of tanks in Spain had most often been defeated by determined defenders with anti-tank guns or obstacles. Rather than seeing this as a failure of piecemeal tactics, French planners tended to view it as confirmation that a well-prepared defense could neutralize armor. Failures in battle were attributed to faulty execution of defensive tactics or poor-quality weapons – not to the defensive concept itself, with senior French commanders such as Maurice Gamelin continuing to largely plan for a war of positions.

American engagement with the military lessons of Spain was the most attenuated of the three. The Neutrality Acts severely constrained official involvement, and the War Department's ability to place qualified observers in Spain was correspondingly limited. The attaché reports that were filed tended toward general observation rather than the detailed technical analysis the conflict could have supported.<sup>76</sup> As Brent Sterling has noted, American

<sup>72</sup> See Squadron Leader Brian Armstrong, *Through a Glass Darkly: The Royal Air Force and the Lessons of the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Shrivenham, UK: Royal Air Force Center for Air and Space Power Studies, 2023), available at <https://www.raf.mod.uk/what-we-do/centre-for-air-and-space-power-studies/aspr/apr-vol12-iss1-3-pdf/>

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *Vers l'Armée de Métier* (Paris, France: Berger-Levrault, 1934). For French attaché reporting, see Eugenia Kiesling, *Arming against Hitler: France and the Limits of Military Planning* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996), pp. 134–138.

<sup>75</sup> See Eugenia Kiesling, *Arming against Hitler: France and the Limits of Military Planning* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996), and Robert A. Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-1939* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1985), pp.178-183.

<sup>76</sup> See Douglas Little, "Red Scare, 1936: Anti-Bolchevism and the Origins of American Nonintervention in the Spanish Civil War," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23, No.2, 1988, pp.291-311.

Evidence of armor's potential for rapid exploitation was acknowledged but deemed exceptional.

The collective military record of Britain, France, and the United States in absorbing the lessons of Spain was one of only partial perception and institutional resistance.

proponents of armored warfare were frequently also somewhat dismissive of the conflict's broader educational value, often arguing "that Spain was not a suitable environment for evaluating the tank, with its hilly terrain, large vineyards and groves, small villages and ample trees."<sup>77</sup> Some general lessons were drawn—most notably on the deficiency of light tanks, the value of antitank guns, and the operational advantages to be derived from a more heavily motorized and mobile force, but much of the conventional wisdom seemed to calcify the notion—already prevalent in London and Paris—that the Spanish Civil War, with its grinding, attritional character, had further demonstrated the overwhelming primacy of the defensive form. What American officers did absorb, unevenly and informally, was a heightened appreciation of airpower's dual potential for terror and interdiction. The reports of observers like Major Robert Candee on German bombing techniques fed into Army Air Corps thinking about strategic bombardment without substantially altering the dominant doctrine of precision daylight bombing that American airpower theorists had elaborated independently of Spanish evidence.<sup>78</sup> In many ways, therefore, Spain confirmed American airpower assumptions more than it challenged them.

In short, the collective military record of Britain, France, and the United States in absorbing the lessons of Spain was one of only partial perception and institutional resistance. And while certain individual officers or foreign correspondents often saw clearly; the wider organizations they served or intellectual circles within which they operated frequently did not.

### Old Temptations, New Theaters: Analytical Pathologies and the War in Ukraine

When it comes to the ongoing war in Ukraine, certain eerily similar analytical pathologies have already made themselves manifest. Most notably, there is a temptation to either view the conflict as oracular in nature and as the harbinger of an entirely new, and terrifying, form of warfare, or, conversely, to dismiss it as too unique and theater-specific to teach us anything of abiding value about a future Sino-US war in the Indo-Pacific<sup>79</sup>. As one excellent recent analysis rightly notes,

*The war in Ukraine has produced a steady stream of striking images and tactical innovations that have baited the US defense community into simple conclusions: either Ukraine is a crystal ball for the future of warfare or its experience is so theater and country-specific that it has no bearing on US strategy and modernization efforts. (...) Ukraine is not a universal template and it is no irrelevant; it is a laboratory of applied adaptation where limited resources, pragmatic engineering, and improvised doctrine have produced scalable effects. The imperative for US planners is not to mimic Kyiv's kits or tactics dogmatically but to institutionalize the analytical discipline that the Ukraine war forces upon us: test systems for cost per effect, assess sustainment and electronic warfare resilience, and design force architectures that accept attritability as a tool rather than a failure.<sup>80</sup>*

<sup>77</sup> Brent L. Sterling, *Other People's Wars: The US Military and the Challenge of Learning From Foreign Conflicts* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021), p.142.

<sup>78</sup> Haywood Hansell, *The Air Plan That Defeated Hitler* (Atlanta, GA: Higgins-McArthur, 1972), pp. 30–32, and Conrad Crane, *Bombs, Cities, and Civilians: American Airpower Strategy in World War II* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993), pp.18–22.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, Vitaliy Goncharuk, "Ukraine Isn't the Model for Winning the Innovation War," *War on the Rocks*, August 12, 2025, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2025/08/ukraine-isnt-the-model-for-winning-the-innovation-war/>.

<sup>80</sup> Sam Scanlon, "Beyond FVPs: Learning the Lessons from the Ukraine War—All of Them," *Modern War Institute*, August 10, 2025, available at <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/beyond-fpvs-learning-the-lessons-of-the-ukraine-war-all-of-them/>

The war has resulted in the vindication of certain enduring truths alongside genuinely novel developments.

In reality, the war has resulted in the vindication of certain enduring truths alongside genuinely novel developments. The return of large-scale, attritional land warfare, with its hundreds of miles of snaking trenches, its dense thickets of barbed wire, and its serried rows of dragon's teeth, has humbled those who confidently declared that precision munitions and network-centric operations had abolished the grinding logic of industrial-age conflict. And in a debate reminiscent to some of those held by Western European observers during the Spanish Civil War, the seeming vulnerability of main battle tanks (MBTs) to cheap, proliferating anti-armor systems has reinvigorated fierce debates about combined arms doctrine, and about whether MBTs are now decisively obsolete or simply adapting and morphing in the face of new threats.<sup>81</sup> It is certainly essential to stress some of the most noteworthy differences between the war currently raging in Ukraine, and any putative future Sino-US conflict fought across the vast maritime expanses of the Indo-Pacific—just as it is necessary to stress the key operational distinctions that would attend any direct NATO-Russia confrontation (for example, with regard to the role of NATO airpower.)<sup>82</sup> To extrapolate freely from Bakhmut to the Taiwan Strait, or from drone swarms over Kherson to carrier-killer missiles in the South China Sea, is to commit precisely the analogical fallacy that responsible applied historians have long warned against. Indeed, the maritime, amphibious, and aerospace dimensions of a potential Sino-American confrontation introduce strategic variables for which the largely landbound Ukrainian theater arguably offers little in the way of directly usable data. Taiwan, the territory currently considered to be the most likely flashpoint for any Sino-US military confrontation, is a mountainous, typhoon-wracked island, which renders it both more difficult to invade than Ukraine, and far more challenging to sustain and resupply.

At the same time, however, one should guard oneself against the kind of intellectual overreach, or kneejerk analytical dismissal that was so prevalent among interwar observers of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>83</sup> No conflict is so *sui generis* as to yield zero insights.

And indeed, it is possible to identify a number of key military innovations, evolutions or developments that have unfolded over the course of the war in Ukraine and that have broader and cross-regional ramifications. To cite but a few of the most self-evident, one could point to the exponential production and use of uncrewed systems, which now reportedly account for more than 80% of destroyed Russian targets in Ukraine, to the growing ubiquity of electronic warfare and the acceleration of the so-called *hider/finder* competition, or to the hugely consequential role played by Starlink which—with its rapid deployability and reliance on a dense constellation of LEO (low earth orbit) satellites—has allowed Ukraine to maintain a level of connectivity that until recently would have been the preserve of the most technologically

<sup>81</sup> For a small sampling of these debates, see Sascha Bruchmann, "Tanks Take a Sharp Turn to Remain Relevant," *IJSS Military Balance Blog*, May 13, 2024, available at <https://www.ijss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2024/05/tanks-take-a-sharp-turn-to-remain-relevant/> Rob Lee, "The Tank is Not Obsolete, and Other Observations About the Future of Combat," *War on the Rocks*, September 06, 2022, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2022/09/the-tank-is-not-obsolete-and-other-observations-about-the-future-of-combat/> and Major General Curtis Taylor, US Army, "The Coming Blitzkrieg: Adapting Armored Formations for the Future of Warfare," *Military Review*, December 2025, available at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/77/military-review/Archives/English/Online-Exclusive/2025/The-Coming-Blitzkrieg/The-Coming-Blitzkrieg-ua1.pdf>

<sup>82</sup> See Fabian Hoffman, "A Russia-NATO War Would Look Nothing Like Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, May 19, 2025, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/05/19/russia-nato-war-putin-ukraine-nuclear-strategy-baltics/> and Eric Rosenbach et al. *Russia's Threats to NATO's Eastern Flank: Scenarios, Strategy and Policy for European Security* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belfer Center, February 2026), available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/05/19/russia-nato-war-putin-ukraine-nuclear-strategy-baltics/>

<sup>83</sup> For a thorough recent examination of the lessons of Ukraine for a Taiwan contingency, see Davis Ellison, Benedetta Girardi and Tim Sweijjs, *From the Steppes of Ukraine to the Shores of Formosa: Lessons Learned from Contemporary War for Taiwan* (The Hague, Netherlands: HCSS, 2025), available at <https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/From-the-Steppes-of-Ukraine-to-the-Shores-of-Formosa-HCSS-2025-1.pdf>

The singularly fast-moving and protean character of the war in Ukraine represents both fertile and challenging intellectual ground for US and allied defense planners.

dominant militaries.<sup>84</sup> It would also be overly simplistic to state that the war in Ukraine has little to teach Asia-fixated strategists. Indeed, to quote one excellent recent study, “*sea denial is having a moment*,” and while aspects of Ukraine’s maritime anti-access strategy would not necessarily translate operationally to wide oceanic bodies in the Indo-Pacific such as the Philippines Sea or the Indian Ocean, they are far more directly applicable to certain of the region’s more congested waterways, such as the Taiwan Strait, the Celebes or Sulu Sea.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, not only has Ukraine inflicted major damage on the Russian black sea fleet through a deadly asymmetric blend of antiship cruise missiles (ASCMs) mines, indigenously developed unmanned surface vessels (USVs) and unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs), it has also pioneered new forms of naval warfare. Thus, in May 2025 Ukrainian Magura USVs retrofitted with air-to-air missiles shot down two Russian Su-30 fighters, while only a few months later, Kyiv conducted what is widely assessed to be the first-ever attack by a UUV on a submarine, striking and reportedly crippling a Russian Kilo-class submarine berthed at Novorossiysk.<sup>86</sup> Somewhat unsurprisingly, frontline Indo-Pacific countries from Taiwan to Japan and the Philippines have all drawn somewhat similar lessons from Ukraine’s successful and remarkably cost-effective sea denial campaign in the Black Sea, intensifying their own procurement and development of unmanned maritime systems — from USVs to UUVs.<sup>87</sup>

Naturally, true military learning only occurs once individual innovations are diffused, institutionalized and then folded into broader operational concepts.<sup>88</sup> In this sense, the singularly fast-moving and protean character of the war in Ukraine represents both fertile and challenging intellectual ground for US and allied defense planners. For example, what does the proliferation of cheap, asymmetric capabilities — from FPVs to low-cost kinetic interceptors — mean with regard to future cost-exchange ratios? Can a financially viable solution to this daunting problem set eventually be found? How should Western militaries best tailor their “high-low mix” of capabilities in order to prevail over the course of a protracted, high intensity conflict?<sup>89</sup> What does the startling success of covert, deeply inserted and AI-enabled drone strikes such as Operation Spider Web mean for the future of US forward basing and homeland defense?<sup>90</sup> What does it

<sup>84</sup> See Rudy Ruitenberg, “Ukraine Says More than 80% of Enemy Targets Now Destroyed by Drones,” *Defense News*, January 28, 2026, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2026/01/28/ukraine-says-more-than-80-of-enemy-targets-now-destroyed-by-drones/>

<sup>85</sup> See Rear Admiral Mike Mattis’ (US Navy) remarks at *Maritime Domain Lessons from Russia-Ukraine* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2025), transcript available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/maritime-domain-lessons-russia-ukraine-conflict-focus>

<sup>86</sup> Howard Altman, “Ukraine Claims World’s First Underwater Drone Attack on Russian Submarine,” *The War Zone*, December 15, 2025, available at <https://www.twz.com/sea/ukraine-claims-worlds-first-underwater-drone-attack-on-russian-submarine> and H.I. Sutton, “Ukrainian Maritime Drone Shoots Down Russian Flanker Jet,” *Naval News*, March 03, 2025, available at <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/05/world-first-ukrainian-maritime-drone-shoots-down-russian-flanker-jet/>

<sup>87</sup> See Yimou Lee and Ben Blanchard, “Taking Lessons from Ukraine, Taiwan Eyes Sea Drones to Counter China,” *Reuters*, June 13, 2025, available at <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/taking-lessons-ukraine-taiwan-eyes-sea-drones-counter-china-2025-06-13/>, Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, “Taiwanese Special Budget to Include Long-Range American Munitions, Sea Drones,” *USNI News*, January 27, 2026, available at <https://news.usni.org/2026/01/27/taiwanese-special-defense-budget-to-include-long-range-american-munitions-sea-drones>

<sup>88</sup> For a classic in the academic literature on this process, see Michael C. Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>89</sup> See Stacie Pettyjohn, Carlton Haelig, Becca Wasser and Josh Wallin, *Build a High-Low Mix to Enhance America’s Warfighting Edge and Deter China* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2025), available at <https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/strengthen-indo-pacific-deterrence-by-enhancing-americas-warfighting-edge>

<sup>90</sup> On this, see Aaron MacLean, “Ukraine, the Future of War is Now,” *Engelsberg Ideas*, June 03, 2025, available at <https://engelsbergideas.com/author/aaron-maclean/> and James Marson, Jane Lytvnenko and Serhii Bosak, “Inside Ukraine’s Daring Operation Spiderweb Attack on Russia,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 09, 2025, available at [https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/ukraine-russia-drone-attack-operation-spider-web-24d821ab?gaa\\_at=eafs&gaa\\_n=AWETsqdkmnqDompAFPtoMOsBE\\_6UpM6MnacOurdOgcdGteDcT-9l3lcQyYSC1bJvPpXM%3D&gaa\\_ts=69a0c539&gaa\\_sig=Y5iSof7wf4DIsOFe4AAatyCgmgv4aGo67EcYOI-U\\_tOgZEEM8Cw-JVppnYSfYwoBP4AFvzZWhk73MTUQYjnJFg%3D%3D](https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/ukraine-russia-drone-attack-operation-spider-web-24d821ab?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=AWETsqdkmnqDompAFPtoMOsBE_6UpM6MnacOurdOgcdGteDcT-9l3lcQyYSC1bJvPpXM%3D&gaa_ts=69a0c539&gaa_sig=Y5iSof7wf4DIsOFe4AAatyCgmgv4aGo67EcYOI-U_tOgZEEM8Cw-JVppnYSfYwoBP4AFvzZWhk73MTUQYjnJFg%3D%3D)

mean when one-way attack drones compress the distance between front and rear, and the very concept of frontline dissolves or becomes more porous, rendering logistics nodes, command posts and drone operators as exposed and contested as any forward trench?<sup>91</sup> And if, for example, unmanned platforms can resupply the forward edge of battle without putting soldiers in harm's way over the so-called "dangerous last mile", will militaries find that the threshold for offensive action has been lowered even as the logistical envelop for such actions has been extended?<sup>92</sup> All of these are uniquely consequential—and intellectually daunting—questions.

At the same time, however, a measure of qualified optimism is in order. Indeed, it is worth noting that contemporary US and European defense strategists enjoy a marked advantage over their noninterventionist forebears. Precisely due to the nature of their involvement in Ukraine—and to the impressive, and oft-underreported, scale of their offshore "training complex"—which has now trained tens of thousands of Ukrainians, NATO and allied militaries are better positioned to learn and adapt than the experientially cloistered American or Western European general staffs during the Spanish Civil War.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, a growing body of reporting would suggest that training initiatives such as Operation Interflex now run increasingly two ways, with the more grizzled and technologically savvy Ukrainians dispensing a form of hard-earned combat experience that is just as—if not more—useful than the formalized training they are receiving from NATO and partner forces.<sup>94</sup> And more recently, it has been reported that Ukrainian military experts have been deployed to the Middle East, where they have lent their their assistance and expertise to US and allied forces facing Iranian drone attacks.<sup>95</sup> In effect, it would be in the US and allied militaries' interest to continue training the Ukrainians, even it was only out of naked self-interest. In the absence of direct intervention, it provides one of the only ways for the forces of democracy to sustain their warfighting edge in an era characterized by greatly accelerated cycles of military innovation.

Training initiatives such as Operation Interflex now run increasingly two ways, with the more grizzled and technologically savvy Ukrainians dispensing a form of hard-earned combat experience.

<sup>91</sup> See Kateryna Stepanenko and Jakub Kostka, *Russia's Quest to Intensify the Theater-Wide Battlefield Air Interdiction Campaign Against Ukraine's Logistics* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, February 2026), available at <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russias-quest-to-intensify-the-theater-wide-battlefield-air-interdiction-campaign-against-ukraines-logistics/>

<sup>92</sup> See Taras Kuzio, "Ukraine Becomes World Leader in Unmanned Ground Vehicles," (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2026), available at <https://jamestown.org/ukraine-becomes-world-leader-in-unmanned-ground-vehicles/>

<sup>93</sup> For the term "offshore training complex," see Mick Ryan, "Military Training Lessons from Ukraine," *The Lowy Interpreter*, October 29, 2025, available at <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/military-training-lessons-ukraine>

<sup>94</sup> On this, see for example, Sinead Baker, "Ukrainian Troops Were Stunned to Learn Their British Trainers Weren't Using Anti-Drone Nets, UK Officer Says," *Business Insider*, January 30, 2026, available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/ukraine-stunned-uk-military-didnt-use-anti-drone-nets-2026-1>, Sinead Baker, "The US Army Once Saw Small Drones Primarily as Scouts. Ukraine Showed They Could be Weapons," *Business Insider*, February 10, 2026, available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/ukraine-showed-us-army-potential-drones-attacks-not-just-recon-2026-2> Adrian Smith, "Inside Operation Interflex: UK Boot Camp for Ukrainian Troops," *The Kyiv Post*, February 23, 2025, available at <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/47513> and Jillian Kay Melchior, "NATO Has Seen the Future and Is Unprepared," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2026, available at [https://www.wsj.com/opinion/nato-has-seen-the-future-and-is-unprepared-887eaf0f?mod=hp\\_opin\\_pos\\_6](https://www.wsj.com/opinion/nato-has-seen-the-future-and-is-unprepared-887eaf0f?mod=hp_opin_pos_6)

<sup>95</sup> Dan Sabbagh, "Ukraine Sent Drone Experts to Protect US Bases in Jordan, Says Zelenskyy," *The Guardian*, March 09, 2026, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/mar/09/ukraine-sent-drone-experts-protect-us-bases-jordan-zelenskyy>

## Authoritarian Adventurism and Democratic Self-Deterrence

The Spanish Civil War is often perceived as something of an inglorious chapter — and as a cautionary tale on the perils of appeasement and democratic self-deterrence.

*"We claim that the Spanish Republic, which is not defeated, has the right to receive arms. The only possible excuse for taking that right away from them would have been if it was to be applied strictly on both sides. No one pretends that is being done; no one suggests that there is not active intervention in Spain. It may be that some will say, "In existing circumstances, even if that right were restored to the Spanish Government, they would not get any more arms than now." If that be so, to give the right could not lead to the general conflict which the right hon. Gentleman fears. On the other hand, if it is not so, then clearly we are weighting the dice against the Spanish Government all the time. (...) I believe that the Spanish Republic has, in fact, been fighting the battle of democracy and freedom against aggression. I believe that resistance in Spain has warded off a crisis which might have come to us. I believe that all the time we have played the ignominious part of holding the hands of Spain while she was attacked by an aggressor and preventing her defending herself. I do not believe that the Spanish people are conquered. I believe that they can yet be victorious. But we do demand that this country should cease the hypocritical farce of non-intervention and restore to the Spanish Government that right which is theirs inherently as the Government of a sovereign State."*

Clement Attlee, in an address to the British House of Commons, a few months before the collapse of the Spanish Republic, on January 31, 1939. Transcript available at <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1939/jan/31/foreign-affairs>

### The Non-Intervention Farce and the Wages of Democratic Abdication

In the annals of Western statecraft, the Spanish Civil War is often perceived as something of an inglorious chapter — and as a cautionary tale on the perils of appeasement and democratic self-deterrence in the face of naked authoritarian aggression.

From its very inception, the Non-Intervention Agreement of August 1936 — which was signed by twenty-seven nations including the very powers most flagrantly violating it — was widely recognized as an elaborate diplomatic fiction. After all, within weeks of signing, El Duce had dispatched ninety aircraft to Franco's Nationalists, Germany had activated the Condor Legion, and the Soviet Union had begun shipping tanks, aircraft, and military advisors to the Republic — all while their representatives sat in London solemnly adjudicating complaints about the agreement's breach. This grotesquerie was not lost on observers: the *American Journal of International Law* noted as early as 1937 that the arrangements had "glossed over or provided a screen behind which violations of pledged undertakings have occurred," rendering Spain "a military laboratory for the testing of weapons and strategy."<sup>96</sup> The British journalist Claud Cockburn, watching the Foreign Office repeatedly deny what any newspaper correspondent in Spain could plainly see, coined the mordant epigram that neatly encapsulated this sorry, and vaguely Kafkaesque episode in diplomatic hypocrisy and

<sup>96</sup> Manley O. Hudson, "The International Non-Intervention Agreement and the Spanish Civil War," *American Journal of International Law*, 31, No.5, 1937, pp.819-820.

self-denial: "Never believe anything until it is officially denied."<sup>97</sup> Britain and France — and the United States through its own parallel neutrality legislation — understood perfectly well what was happening, but clung to the fiction of non-intervention less out of naivety than out of a form of despondent fatalism. Indeed, decision-makers in London and Paris remained largely convinced that to acknowledge the intervention openly would force a choice between acquiescence and confrontation with fascist powers — something for which neither democracy felt it was militarily prepared. In addition, as mentioned earlier, there was a deep fear in France of the toxicity of Spanish politics eventually migrating across the Pyrenees, and further infecting an already sickened French body politic. Leon Blum's embattled Front Populaire government, in particular, grew steadily more convinced that any French intervention in favor of the Spanish Republic would lead to a rightwing coup.

Last but not least, one must not forget that, in addition to the generalized trauma of World War I, many of the lead policymakers in France and Great Britain at the time were often operating with their own distinct set of priors — and particularly their memories of their botched interventions during the Russian Civil War. In the same way that contemporary advocates of retrenchment will frequently point to the bruising experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan as alleged proof of the inefficacy of any form of future military action, interwar policymakers cleaving to a policy of appeasement would often allude — either in public statements or in private correspondence — to the failures that had attended Western attempts at intervention during the Russian Civil War only a few decades earlier. As the great historian Zara Steiner has noted, "The Russian intervention of 1918-20 haunted British policymakers in their handling of Spain," while Martin Thomas similarly observes that French reluctance to intervene in Spain was "conditioned by memories of the Russian debacle."<sup>98</sup> For Blum, Daladier, Neville Chamberlain, or Anthony Eden, the "erreur russe" was still a fresh and painful memory, and therefore — for better or worse — a particularly potent analogy, with Chamberlain glumly ruminating in his diary in the spring of 1937, that "the Russian business after the war showed how impossible it is for democratic governments to carry through intervention in civil struggles."<sup>99</sup> The uninspiring result of these combined pressures was a policy of what some scholars would later term "organized hypocrisy" — i.e. the systematic decoupling of proclaimed principles from actual practice whenever the costs of consistency grew too high.<sup>100</sup>

For all this policy's evident pitfalls (and dire second-order effects), a measure of sympathy, or at least empathy for Britain and France's overwhelmed and angst-ridden policymakers is perhaps in order. After all, as the great historian Trevelyan once wrote, "every true history must remember that the past was once as real as the present and as uncertain as the future."<sup>101</sup> The historical evidence now clearly shows that neither Hitler nor Mussolini desired or considered themselves ready to go to war in 1937 — instead Hitler rather cynically observed that, in addition to the military rationale behind using Spain as a testing ground, "German policy would be advanced if the Spanish question continues for a time to occupy Europe's attention

<sup>97</sup> Claud Cockburn, *A Discord of Trumpets: An Autobiography* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p.300.

<sup>98</sup> Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933-1939* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.642, and Martin Thomas, *France and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.88.

<sup>99</sup> For "erreur russe" see Daladier's comments in a Conseil des Ministres (cabinet meeting) in February 1938, whereby he stated, "We will not repeat the Russian error, where we became entangled without being able to decide," quoted in Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La Decadence: Politique Etrangere de la France, 1932-1939* (Paris, France: Imprimerie Nationale, 1979), p.412. For Chamberlain's diary entry, see Robert Self (Ed.) *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters: The Downing Street Years, 1934-1940* (London, UK: Ashgate, 2005 Ed.), p.112.

<sup>100</sup> See Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>101</sup> G.M. Trevelyan, *Clio, A Muse and Other Essays* (London, UK: Longmans Green, 1913), p.49.

Decision-makers in London and Paris remained largely convinced that to acknowledge the intervention openly would force a choice between acquiescence and confrontation.

and therefore divert it from Germany."<sup>102</sup> And indeed, the war in Spain did exert a diversionary effect on France, in particular, which was obliged to factor a new southern front into their war planning, and to redeploy large numbers of gendarmes and troops along their Pyrenean border, both to defend against future conventional threats, and to contend with waves of hundreds of thousands of refugees.<sup>103</sup>

As one renowned historian of interwar France has noted, although The Third Republic's choice of nonintervention may have appeared prudent at the time, it wound up having grim ramifications for French grand strategy; curtailing its freedom of action, exacerbating its reliance on a Great Britain singularly bent on appeasement, and reducing its overextended armies to a defensive crouch:

*It would be hard to exaggerate the impact of the war on French policy. The subsequent political and strategic anxieties explain in part the retreat from east/central Europe in 1938. The military implications were terrifying. It was assumed that if Franco won the civil war, France would be encircled by a triple alliance of Germany, Italy and nationalist Spain. As well as the threat to the Pyrenees land frontier, air and sea links with French North Africa were endangered. A third of the French army was in North Africa and survival in war depended on the speed and safety with which troops could be ferried across the Western Mediterranean. The nightmare of encirclement made France cleave closer to Britain. Presented with almost simultaneous threats to her Mediterranean flank and to geographically remote allies in central Europe, France put her frontiers first. Spain was a warning of what might happen in France.<sup>104</sup>*

## Escalation Paralysis and its Costs: Ukraine in the Shadow of the 1930s

One obviously cannot draw too direct an analogy between Western democracies' inaction during the Spanish Civil War, and their policies vis a vis Ukraine today, which they continue—by and large—to support; whether financially, militarily or in terms of intelligence sharing. Moreover, interwar policymakers still lived in a pre-atomic world, and therefore did not have to reckon with the disquieting possibility of deliberate or inadvertent nuclear escalation. That said, there are certain striking parallels when it comes to authoritarian regimes' seeming far greater tolerance for risk, and resultant weaponization of Western publics' fears of escalation. Indeed, throughout the conflict, Western governments have repeatedly withheld or delayed the transfer of advanced weapons systems—long-range missiles, MBTs, F-16 fighters, and ATACMS among them—citing fears that their provision would provoke Russian escalation or draw NATO directly into the war, a calculus that arguably privileged hypothetical risks over the demonstrable cost of Ukrainian battlefield setbacks. In several cases, weapons eventually deemed acceptable and transferred without triggering the feared escalation were withheld for months or years, before being finally provided to the Ukrainians, suggesting that the escalation threshold was either misread or politically instrumentalized, and that the delays themselves exacted a measurable military price—most acutely during the 2022–23 period

<sup>102</sup> Hitler, quoted in Richard Rhodes, *Hell and Good Company: The Spanish Civil War and the World it Made* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2014), p.62.

<sup>103</sup> See Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934-1938* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), and Marie-Claude Rafaneau-Boj, *Les Camps de Refugies Espagnols en France (1939-1945)* (Paris, France: L'Harmattan, 1993).

<sup>104</sup> Anthony Adamthwaite, "French Military Intelligence and the Coming of War 1935-1939," in Christopher Andrew and Jeremy Noakes (Eds.), *Intelligence and International Relations, 1900-1945* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1987), p.201.

There are certain striking parallels when it comes to authoritarian regimes' seeming far greater tolerance for risk, and resultant weaponization of Western publics' fears of escalation.

when Ukrainian forces, lacking sufficient armor and air defense, suffered attritional losses that timelier provision might have mitigated. One could thus argue that Western deterrence logic, by treating each incremental capability as a potential tripwire, has inadvertently ceded to its adversaries a form of escalation dominance, allowing Moscow and North Korea to up their own aggression in the knowledge that self-imposed Western restraint would reliably slow the replenishment of Ukrainian combat power. Instead, as one essay recently argues, the Ukrainian experience has shown that in any future conflict, a more agile, sophisticated and proactive approach to escalation management is needed, and *"Washington must be prepared to probe, signal and maneuver along the escalation spectrum—sometimes restraining itself, sometimes escalating deliberately—to establish advantageous limits that provide the United States the military freedom to achieve its desired objectives while minimizing the cost and risk."*<sup>105</sup>

Western deterrence logic, by treating each incremental capability as a potential tripwire, has inadvertently ceded to its adversaries a form of escalation dominance.

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<sup>105</sup> Rebecca Lissner and John Kawika Warden, "Ukraine and the New Way of War," *Foreign Affairs*, February 17, 2026, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/ukraine-and-new-way-war-lissner-warden>

## The Fallacy of Regional Siloization

*"I decline to believe that any war involving the leading European nations is about to occur. I decline to believe that any such adventure in suicide is imminent! On the contrary, I am convinced that the leaders of those nations, knowing what a perhaps fatal blow another extensive war would be to the fabric of European civilization, will find some common-sense method of adjusting all controversies. Of course, all the world would be glad to see the civil strife in Spain wholly localized."*

Robert Walton Moore, Acting US Secretary of State, quoted in "International: Little World War," in *Time Magazine*, January 18, 1937, Vol. XXIX, No.3, available at: <https://time.com/archive/6768062/international-little-world-war/>

The experience of a Spanish Civil War provides a valuable reminder of the intellectual fallacy of regional siloization.

### Spain and the Myth of Peninsular Containment

Finally, the experience of a Spanish Civil War provides a valuable reminder of the intellectual fallacy of regional siloization, and of the artificiality of trying to rigidly bound or delineate combat theaters at a time when our adversaries are already operating across regional seams, and arguably in a more integrated fashion than we are. Indeed, the conviction held by many British, French, and American policymakers that the Spanish Civil War could be hermetically sealed within the Iberian Peninsula proved to be one of the signal strategic miscalculations of the interwar period. Far from remaining a localized conflict, the war drew in the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Fascist Italy as active belligerents, transforming Spain into a proving ground for the weapons, tactics, and command structures that would define the Second World War, while simultaneously accelerating the consolidation of the Axis alliance system that the Non-Intervention Committee had been designed in part to forestall. The war galvanized ideological mobilization across the globe, drawing volunteers from over fifty countries into the International Brigades, radicalizing diaspora communities from the Americas to Australia, and reshaping the politics of the French Popular Front in ways that reverberated directly into the Munich crisis of 1938.<sup>106</sup> Germany's shared anti-communist crusade in Spain moreover provided the ideological and diplomatic cement that drew Japan closer to the Axis powers; the Anti-Comintern Pact, signed by Germany and Japan in November 1936 and joined by Italy in 1937, was explicitly framed around the shared struggle against Bolshevism that the Spanish war had placed at the center of European and global politics.<sup>107</sup> In this sense, the conflict that Western statesmen sought initially to dismiss as a mere regional brush fire instead rapidly morphed into the furnace in which the international order of the 1930s was irrevocably immolated.

<sup>106</sup> On the International Brigades, see Giles Tremlett, *The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2021).

<sup>107</sup> See Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union, and Communism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), pp.147-152, and Ricky W. Law, *Transnational Nazism: Ideology and Culture in German-Japanese Relations, 1919-1936* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

To think across regional seams is not to indulge in strategic overextension but to recognize the conflict for what it actually is: a stress test of the entire rules-based international order.

## Understanding the Global Nature of the War in Ukraine:

The ongoing war in Ukraine, is—if anything—an even more global struggle, with Asian democracies such as New Zealand, Japan, Australia, and South Korea drawing closer to NATO and providing valuable support to Ukraine's embattled defenders, even as an increasingly closely aligned axis of authoritarian powers continue to support and sustain Russian's economy and war efforts.<sup>108</sup> Just as statesmen who sought to quarantine the Spanish Civil War within the Iberian Peninsula failed to grasp that it was in fact a crucible for the reordering of the entire international system, those who frame the war in Ukraine as a discrete European conflict to be settled cheaply so that strategic attention can pivot elsewhere risk a comparable failure of imagination—for the war has already drawn in, among others, North Korean troops, Chinese material support, Iranian drones, and African mercenaries, and its outcome will set the terms for whether revisionist powers globally conclude that the post-1945 prohibition on territorial conquest by force is a living norm or a dead letter.<sup>109</sup> In short, to think across regional seams is not to indulge in strategic overextension but to recognize the conflict for what it actually is: a stress test of the entire rules-based international order whose result will be read as carefully in Taipei, Tehran, and Pyongyang as it is in Moscow and Brussels, and which therefore demands a commensurate, globally articulated response rather than the compartmentalized, theater-by-theater logic that history has already revealed to be catastrophically inadequate.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Chinese strategists are, for their part, distinctly aware of—and occasionally disquieted by—the potentially tectonic nature of these alignments, with one sinologist noting that, “Beijing’s core concern is that North Korea’s role in Ukraine could accelerate security linkages between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theaters. PRC analysts have warned that framing Taiwan and Ukraine as interconnected security crises strengthens transatlantic resolve against China.” See Jake R. Rinaldi, “Testimony Before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on China’s Role in the Axis of Autocracy,” February 20, 2025, available at [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2025-02/Jake\\_Rinaldi\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2025-02/Jake_Rinaldi_Testimony.pdf)

<sup>109</sup> See Simon Ostrovksy and Katia Patin, “Ukraine Says Russia is Recruiting African Mercenaries to Fight in its War,” *PBS News*, November 13, 2025, available at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/ukraine-says-russia-is-recruiting-african-mercenaries-to-fight-in-its-war> For one landmark study on the broader global ramifications of the Russia-Ukraine war, see Bryan Frederick et al. *Consequences of the Russia-Ukraine War and the Changing Face of Conflict* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2025), available at [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RBA3141-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA3141-1.html)

<sup>110</sup> For two recent analyses of what this strategy might concretely entail, both in terms of US grand strategy and allied defense-industrial cooperation, see Evan Braden Montgomery, *Breaking the Double Bind: U.S. Defense Strategy and Multi-Theater Deterrence* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2026), available at <https://www.csbaonline.org/research/publications/breaking-the-double-bind-u.s-defense-strategy-and-multi-theater-deterrence/publication/1> and Luis Simon, *Deterrence at Scale: Cross-Theater Defense Cooperation in an Age of Precise Mass* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2026), available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/deterrence-scale-cross-theater-defense-cooperation-age-precise-mass>

## Conclusion

When Pablo Picasso was approached in 1968 by emissaries of Francisco Franco's regime seeking the return of *Guernica* to Spain, the artist flatly refused. The painting, he bluntly stated, would only return to its home country once "the Republic is restored in Spain."<sup>111</sup> For several long decades, the great canvas remained in exile at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, until finally in September 1981—six years after Franco's death and the restoration of Spanish democracy—it crossed the Atlantic under heavy guard to take up residence in Madrid. Its long-awaited return was more than a simple act of cultural repatriation. Indeed, in many ways it was also a moral verdict, a confirmation that one of the great lies at the cancerous heart of the Nationalist regime had finally been extirpated. For a lie there had unmistakably been. In the immediate aftermath of the destruction of Guernica, Franco's propagandists and their Nazi accomplices had launched a particularly vile—and sophisticated—disinformation campaign, with Nationalist spokesmen insisting that Guernica had not been razed by aircraft, but deliberately burned by retreating Basque forces.<sup>112</sup> The regime commissioned two formal reports—the *Machimbarrena-Milán del Bosch* report of May 1937 and the *Herrán* report of 1938, (the latter circulated in English specifically to poison British public opinion) both purporting to establish that no aerial bombing had taken place, and that the number of victims "of the fire" did not exceed one hundred. Meanwhile, in London, Joachim von Ribbentrop—simultaneously Hitler's ambassador to the Court of St James's and a member of the very Non-Intervention Committee charged with policing the conflict—was among the most energetic international deniers of the attack, insisting with blithe confidence that German aircraft had played no role whatsoever.<sup>113</sup> For thirty-eight years, until Franco's death, the official position of the Spanish state was that Guernica had burned at Basque hands, and the mere public assertion that it had been bombed by Fascist forces was punishable by fine or imprisonment.<sup>114</sup>

The shamelessness (and tenaciousness) of this lie—with the perpetrators of an atrocity attributing it to its victims—has an unmistakable, and chilling, contemporary resonance. When Russian officials and state media assert that Ukraine has shelled its own Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, or that Ukrainian forces have staged the massacre at Bucha, they are reaching for precisely the same instrument: the inversion of perpetrator and victim, deployed with the cynical assurance that the resultant confusion, however temporary, serves the aggressor's purpose.<sup>115</sup> In both cases—Guernica in 1937 and Ukraine today—the disinformation is not merely a cynical ploy but also indicative of a more enduring truth: regimes that are willing to

<sup>111</sup> Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, *Picasso's Guernica: History, Transformations, Meanings* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p.167.

<sup>112</sup> Some regime-sponsored accounts added the ugly flourish that it was Republican explosives stored in the town's sewers had caused the destruction. See Herbert R. Southworth, *Guernica! Guernica! A Study of Journalism, Diplomacy and History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), and John Lloyd, "From Guernica's Ruins: A Lesson in Disinformation," *Reuters*, December 11, 2017, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/opinion/commentary-from-guernicas-ruins-a-lesson-in-fake-news-idUSKBN1E136N/>

<sup>113</sup> See Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (London, UK: Harper Collins, 2006), pp.199-201.

<sup>114</sup> For more on the culture of lies at the heart of Francoist readings of history, see Ángel Viñas, *En el combate por la Historia: La República, La Guerra Civil, El Franquismo* (Barcelona, Spain: Pasado y Presente, 2012).

<sup>115</sup> See Amanda Seltz and Areijeta Lajka, "Amid Horror in Bucha, Russia Relies on Propaganda and Disinformation," *Associated Press*, April 06, 2022, available at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/amid-horror-in-bucha-russia-relies-on-propaganda-and-disinformation> and "Russian War Report: Russian Conspiracy Alleges False Flag at Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Plant," *The Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Research Lab*, July 07, 2023, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russian-false-flag-zaporizhzhia/> and Darya Dolzikova, "Kursk Nuclear Power Plant: The Newest Target for Russian Disinformation," *RUSI*, August 30, 2024, available at <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/kursk-nuclear-power-plant-newest-target-russian-disinformation#:~:text=Kursk%20Nuclear%20Power%20Plant:%20The,in%20its%20war%20against%20Ukraine.>

In the immediate aftermath of the destruction of Guernica, Franco's propagandists and their Nazi accomplices had launched a particularly vile—and sophisticated—disinformation campaign.

bomb civilian populations are, almost by definition, regimes that are willing to lie about having done so. These are conflicts, in other words, that are—as great figures such as Hemingway, Koestler and Orwell later noted—as much about the survival of a shared notion of truth as they are about the raw balance of power.

It is against this blood-flecked, mendacity-stained canvas—in which the destruction of a small Basque market town became both a gruesome experiment in military tactics and a heinous exemplar of state-engineered falsification—that one should analyze the Spanish Civil War, one of those oft-quoted, but seldom studied, historical analogies that continuously pepper our current discourse.

At the end of the day, the Spanish Civil War was far more than a national tragedy, or even just a “dress rehearsal for the world war which everyone knew was coming.”<sup>116</sup> In many ways, in its darkly prophetic nature, it remains deeply resonant to this day— not only did it herald the accelerating lethality of modern, industrialized warfare, it also highlights the potentially fatal consequences of democratic inaction, and reminds us of the impossibility of hermetically sealing any great-power proxy conflict within the borders of a single, war-ravaged nation. The three lessons explored in this essay are thus not merely of antiquarian interest. They speak with an uncomfortable directness to the present moment, and to the choices that Western democracies now confront in Ukraine and beyond.

The first lesson—that military learning is as much an institutional as an intellectual challenge—reminds us that the availability of evidence is never, by itself, sufficient. Interwar Western militaries were hardly deprived of information about the evolution of warfare in Spain. Instead, they were starved of the organizational culture, intellectual honesty, and doctrinal flexibility required to act upon it. The same temptations—toward either oracular over-interpretation or breezy dismissal—float over contemporary debates about the war in Ukraine and require the same intellectual antidote: rigorous discernment and analytical humility.<sup>117</sup>

The second lesson—that authoritarian powers will consistently seek to exploit democratic publics' fears of escalation to their advantage—is perhaps the most urgently relevant. The Non-Intervention Agreement was not simply a failure of nerve; it was a self-inflicted wound, one that handed Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini precisely the operational freedom of maneuver they required. In that sense, certain patterns remain remarkably persistent. Escalation dominance, whether in the late 1930s or today, accrues to those willing to act, not to those paralyzed by the fear of acting.

The third lesson—that proxy wars are, by their very nature, global struggles incapable of regional containment—should, by now, require no further argument. The war in Ukraine has already redrawn the contours of the international order, tightened the bonds of an authoritarian coalition stretching from Moscow to Pyongyang and Tehran, and concentrated strategic minds from Seoul to Canberra. To treat it as a manageable European distraction or as something that requires a rushed settlement to focus on other, seemingly more pressing,

<sup>116</sup> George Orwell's famous concluding remarks in George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1952), p.206.

<sup>117</sup> See, for example, Michael Brown and Matt Kaplan, “What America Must Learn from Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 17, 2026, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/what-america-must-learn-ukraine> and Mark Hvizda et al. *Dispersed, Disguised and Degradable: The Implications of the Fighting in Ukraine for Future US-Involved Conflict* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2025), available at [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA3141-2.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3141-2.html)

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policy priorities is not prudent statecraft.<sup>118</sup> Instead, it falls into the same category of wishful thinking that led Robert Walton Moore, the Acting US Secretary of State, to declare confidently in January 1937 that the world's leaders would surely find "some common-sense method of adjusting all controversies"—even as the Condor Legion was methodically reducing Guernica to ash.

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<sup>118</sup> As one analysis rightly notes, "Despite an ongoing rebalance toward the Indo-Pacific, the return of great power competition, and a renewed effort to restore military advantage over China, the United States still faces the prospect of military contingencies against different adversaries in regions that US policymakers have traditionally identified as critical to US interests. Yet focusing more narrowly on China in a multi-theater, multi-rival world creates openings for other rivals to challenge the status quo within their regions because they face fewer barriers to hostile behavior." Evan Braden Montgomery, *Breaking the Double Bind: U.S. Defense Strategy and Multi-Theater Deterrence* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2026), p.ii, available at <https://www.csbaonline.org/research/publications/breaking-the-double-bind-u.s-defense-strategy-and-multi-theater-deterrence/publication/1>



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