

**Jose E. Alvarez, *The Spanish Foreign Legion during the Spanish Civil War, 1936*
(University of Missouri, 2018): A Review**

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In the last period there are more and more researches connected to the events of the 19th and 20th century military history processed by military historians including the book of José E. Alvarez¹ which focuses on the activities of the Legion during the first six months of the Spanish Civil War. The author is a particularly good acquaintance of the less researched Spanish Legion subject, he has been researching and publishing books and articles on the organization's activities for many years. The author's work is also important because materials about the Legion and its activities are in the most access in Spanish-language, and only in a very limited extent is in English. I experienced it by myself as I was searching for the activities of the Legion in Western Sahara and for the Hungarians serving in the Legion.²

In July 1936 one of the most highly trained and prepared units of the Spanish army was the Legion of six battalions, with barely 4,000 members, whose support was essential for the revolting generals against republic government. Therefore, every effort was made to win, and it was largely due to them that the uprising was successful and that it was nipped in the bud by the government. But Franco could also thanked to them, that he was the one of the candidates and self-candidates who finally gained the control of the country. The Legion was deployed until 1934 only in the African colonies, especially in Morocco, where they had very significant combat experience, so when other units of the Spanish army were unable to handle the Asturian uprising, they were called upon by the government. They could put an end to the rebellion very effectively with minimal losses, although both the left and later those who commanded them were critical of their actions against insurgents and civilians.³ From what the author described, it seems that the Legion did not want to be actively involved in politics

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² Besenyo János: Hungarians in the Spanish Legion? Węrzy w Legionie Hiszpańskim? *Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis* 2019, 26, 25—44, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.31261/SPUS.2019.26.02>
<https://www.journals.us.edu.pl/index.php/SPUS/article/view/8288>

³ More on this: James Matthews: *Reluctant Warriors: Republican Popular Army and Nationalist Army Conscripts in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, OUP Oxford, 2012; Francisco J. Romero Salvadó: *Historical Dictionary of the Spanish Civil War*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2013; Paul Preston: *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2007; Antony Beevor: *The Spanish Civil War*, Cassell, 2001; Antony Beevor: *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, Penguin Books, 2006; Stanley G Payne: *The Spanish Civil War*, Cambridge University Press, 2012;

at all, but simply wanted to be soldiers and do what they were supposed to do to protect African territories. This was successfully done. At that time they were the elite of the Spanish army, who got the hardest training, were incredibly disciplined, comrades-in-arms and had considerable combat experience. They created a kind of "elitist subculture" where, unlike in the Spanish army of that time, the aim was not the daily survival and ranks of the ladder, but the immediate and effective execution of the orders given and even the worthy death of a soldier. In contrast, the Spanish military and police forces were deeply interwoven with politics, nepotism, corruption, and even the political and ideological divisions of their leaders, sliding to inefficiency and dysfunction. For the most part, therefore they were unable to deal effectively with the coup that erupted in the summer of 1936. In contrast, the Legion leadership tried to keep the organization out of politics, even though some leaders sympathized with right-wing forces. They were finally in a position where they felt they had no choice but to support the coups and participate in the overthrow of the legitimate government of the country. It is unacceptable in a democratic state, but in that period Spain had repeatedly suffered bloodless or minimal military coups, so the most thought that it would not be otherwise. But it was not that case, as the leaders of the republic refused to "retire quietly" and were supported by workers and merchants living in big cities, leading to a three-year brutal civil war, with the participation of the Legion and the Regulares recruited from Moroccan and Saharawi tribes.⁴ According to the author, the purpose of the coups was not to dissolve the republic, but in some way to "reform" it. This is evidenced by the fact that one of the military leaders who launched the uprising, General Emilio Mola Vidal, wanted to rule the government, but he intended to preserve the form of the republic and even to operate the military government on its behalf.⁵ But not only he but most of the coupists thought so. Following the capture of Badajoz the Legion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Yagüe concluded his victory speech by saying, "Cry with me: Long live to Spain! Long live to the Republic! Long live to the army!"⁶

The author emphasized that, besides the high level of organization and professionalism, brutality and violence in the Legion were part of everyday life, without which they would not have been able to overcome the Moroccan battleground, where almost

⁴ Besenyő János: *Western Sahara*, Publikon Publisher, Pécs, 2009, p. 59.

⁵ José E. Alvarez: *The Spanish Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War, 1936*, University of Missouri Press, 2018, p. 10.

⁶ José E. Alvarez: *The Spanish Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War, 1936*, University of Missouri Press, 2018, p. 74

every Spanish unit had failed.⁷ These qualities were used effectively in the context of the "white terror" which was used against the forces stand opposite of nationalists, and the civilian population that supports them. It was not only these that led to the atrocities within the pacification, but also the historical experience Franco gained as a young officer during the Moroccan fighting, when the strategic conquest of Annual was not properly prepared, resulting in one of the greatest losses to the Spanish Army in Africa. Therefore, despite the urging of the Germans who supported him, Franco did not hurry to conquer Madrid, but systematically occupied the areas in his path and eliminated all possible resistance, and proceeded only when he felt that there was no force behind him to attack. Therefore, his soldiers collected all weapons, arrested and/or executed those who fought against nationalists with weapons or could endanger their objectives. This was the strategy of *limpiar* (cleanse) and *castigar* (punish).⁸ It must be seen that the Republicans also were not combatants of the Grail, as evidenced by the cruelties and atrocities they had committed against non-sympathetic civilians or former captives who fought against them.⁹ Of course, for the Legion's success, in addition to the above, it was essential in the early stages the inertia of the government, the shameful state of the Spanish army, the division of the country and the fortunes of the coups, as well as the wide variety of foreign support of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy such as military, logistics, transport, etc. supports. Without German and Italian transport equipment the units stationed at African bases would not have been able to cross the Strait of Gibraltar which were under the control of Republican forces, so the Republicans, if they would have be able to, could easily put an end to the rebellion. However, with foreign aid, the rebel generals crossed a border from which there was no return and "a failed coup turned into a three-year bloody civil war" involving German and Italian soldiers on Franco's side.¹⁰ While the government turned to the Soviet Union which sent weapons and advisers to support the Republicans for their own political good and in exchange for Spain's gold

⁷ John H. Galey: *Bridegrooms of Death: A Profile Study of the Spanish Foreign Legion*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Apr., 1969), pp. 47-64, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/259661?seq=1>

⁸ José E. Alvarez: *The Spanish Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War, 1936*, University of Missouri Press, 2018. pp. 52-53.

⁹ José E. Alvarez: *The Spanish Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War, 1936*, University of Missouri Press, 2018. pp. 66, 76, 215, 237, 266.

¹⁰ José E. Alvarez: *The Spanish Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War, 1936*, University of Missouri Press, 2018. pp. 22, 143-144.

reserves.¹¹ Thus, the Civil War quickly became international, with armed clashes between left and right ideas.

The book follows the Legion's activities throughout the first months of the Civil War in Seville, Almendralejo, Merida, Badajoz, Santa Amalia, Talavera de la Reina, Santa Olalla, Maqueda, Toledó, Illescas, Oviedo and many other settlements which they hadn't only to occupy, but protect it from harsh counterattacks. There were heroic and less heroic events during the clashes, but it is clear that the legionnaires had done their bit in hard fight, which was also shown on their loss lists.¹² The value of the book is enhanced by the fact that the author not only worked as a "distanced" historian from archival sources, but also used interviews with active participants in the events and even visited the venues in person. I particularly liked the fact that he introduced several legionnaires or persons associated with the Legion from the "human" side in his book, without concealing their positive or negative qualities. Among them there was serving in the staff of the 8th Battalion, the Hungarian originated Inocencio Kadar Szass (original name: Károly Nagy) who, with some legionnaires, successfully stopped an attack by a unit of four Soviet tanks and 400 infantry for which he received a special award.¹³ It is also interesting that it can be found so many information about civil war participants and the weapons and tools they use, which not many ordinary readers, but even many historians don't know.

After reading the book the reader declines the common belief that the Legion had fought against the Spanish patriots as a foreign unit, quasi mercenaries, moreover it is clear that 80% of the Legion's staff was not foreigner but Spanish who fought for their homeland. It is strange that foreigners formerly serving in international brigades fighting on the side of the Republican forces were considered freedom fighters, even though they served the imperial goals of the Stalin-led Soviet Union and not the legitimate Spanish government. In fact, many of them have committed similar or more brutal acts against those who were opposing them (soldiers, civilians, church persons, etc.) than legionaries. Nevertheless, their perceptions have been more positive in recent decades. The author also denies that the 10-day-long Badajoz massacre would have been committed by legionaries, as previously claimed by several

¹¹ José E. Alvarez: *The Spanish Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War, 1936*, University of Missouri Press, 2018. p. 217

¹² José E. Alvarez: *The Spanish Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War, 1936*, University of Missouri Press, 2018. pp. 85, 205, 208

¹³ José E. Alvarez: *The Spanish Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War, 1936*, University of Missouri Press, 2018. pp. 177, 269. and Besenyő János: Hungarians in the Spanish Legion? Węrzy w Legionie Hiszpańskim? *Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis* 2019, 26, 25—44, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.31261/SPUS.2019.26.02> <https://www.journals.us.edu.pl/index.php/SPUS/article/view/8288>

sources.¹⁴ The arrested Republicans were executed by the Falangists and members of the Civil Guard, not by the legionnaires who had left the city by then.¹⁵ This book provides a much more sophisticated look at those events which are still a sensitive issue in Spain, and so there is not much archival material to be searched for connected to the Civil War. Hopefully it will change, and more and more archival material will be released for researchers and books like by Alvarez will be produced. I hope that the author does not stop at 1936, but will work on the Legion's full civil war activities, which I am already expecting.

I recommend this book to anyone who is curious about the circumstances of the events in 1936, the circumstances of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, and the activities of the opposing parties, most notably the Legion.

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¹⁴ Elisabeth Bolorinos Allard (2015): *The Crescent and the Dagger: Representations of the Moorish Other during the Spanish Civil War*, *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/14753820.2015.1082811

¹⁵ José E. Alvarez: *The Spanish Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War, 1936*, University of Missouri Press, 2018. p. 75, 244.

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