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# The Road to Dunkirk: British Intelligence and the Spanish Civil War<sup>1</sup>

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This article will explain to what use the British military establishment put military intelligence coming from the Spanish civil war, and whether or not this intelligence had any effect on British defence plans during the late 1930s. Rather than focusing only on what the British armed forces should or should not have learned from the Spanish battlefields, this paper will attempt to explain why these lessons were never learned. An analysis of the ways in which this intelligence was read demonstrates how stereotypes and inter-service struggles over strategy rendered any lessons that could have been learnt from Spain completely worthless.

Contemporary historiography has correctly acknowledged that the warfare witnessed during the Spanish civil war is key in explaining the development and refinement of German military operational doctrine prior to the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> What should and should not have been learned by the Allies is an issue that has attracted a great deal of attention from military historians.<sup>3</sup> However, their approaches have

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on my dissertation 'The Nakedness of the Land of Intelligence: Warfare in the Spanish Civil War, British Intelligence and the Road to Dunkirk', which was submitted in August 2003 as part of the MA in War Studies, King's College, London. I am most grateful to my supervisor, Dr Joe Maiolo, as well as to the staff of the Public Records Office (PRO), the Imperial War Museum (IWM) Department of Sound Records and Photograph Archive, and the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA). Furthermore, I would like to dedicate this article to those whose unconditional love kept me warm during the long winter of last year. To Isodoro and Carmen, my very own history; to Angel, Ma Carmen, and Andrés, my family; to my faithful Jaime; and to Silvia, the first summer sunlight.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, B. Bond, *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars* (Oxford, 1980), p. 322; H. Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (London and New York, 1983), pp. 159, 163; D.C. Watt, *Too Serious A Business: European Armed Forces and the Approach to the Second World War* (London and New York, 1975), pp. 66, 68.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, J.S. Corum, 'The Spanish Civil War: Lessons Learned and Not Learned by the Great Powers', *Journal of Military History* LXII (1998), pp. 313-34; G.F. Hofmann, 'The Tactical and Strategic Use of Attaché Intelligence: The Spanish Civil War and the U.S. Army's Misguided Quest for a Modern Tank Doctrine', *Journal of Military History* LXII (1998), pp. 101-34; S.J. Zaloga, 'Soviet Tank Operations in the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* XII (1999), pp. 134-62.

focused primarily on what the American, British and Russian high commands failed to learn from the Spanish battlefields, largely ignoring the causes of this failure.

The insurgent forces in Spain carried out their *coup d'état* on 18 July 1936 but failed to gain complete control of the country's major cities. This, combined with the decision of Hitler and Mussolini to support the rebels, radically transformed a rather weak military uprising into a long and devastating three-year civil war. The progressive involvement of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany altered the war, which was initially conducted in the form of advancing columns, resembling Spain's colonial tactics learned in Morocco. The procurement of German and Italian aircraft for the transportation of General Franco's African Army to the aerodromes of Seville and Jerez de la Frontera during July and August 1936, and the arrival of more German and Italian bomber and fighter aircraft, tanks, anti-aircraft (AA) and anti-tank (AT) guns between August and October,<sup>4</sup> slowly but steadily transformed these colonial tactics into the more complex modern tactics of joint operations.

The British government closely followed the worrying events in Spain. Its initial interest in the situation can be explained by a combination of strategic and economic factors, and above all by political considerations. Gibraltar's safety, and therefore that of the Mediterranean Fleet, depended on relative stability in the area. By 1935 the UK was a major force in the Spanish economy: the Spanish armed forces were the most significant purchaser of British weapons, ammunition and naval material, and one third of Britain's iron ore, 66.4% of its pyrite and 70% of its mercury were imported from Spain.<sup>5</sup> Yet most importantly Stanley Baldwin's Conservative government was especially suspicious of the leftist nature of the Popular Front elected in 1936, which resulted in the Foreign Office constantly drawing parallels between the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and political events in Spain. As O. Scott, first secretary of the British embassy in Madrid, reported to London on 25 March 1936: 'The general conditions in Spain are extremely similar to those of Russia before the Bolshevik revolution.'<sup>6</sup> These factors, together with military events such as the defeat of the mechanized Italian Corpo Truppe Volontarie during the Guadalajara offensive in March 1937, the daily bombing of Madrid, and the destruction of Guernica in April 1937, served to awaken the British government's interest in monitoring and analysing the military aspects of the Spanish civil war. As Sir Thomas Inskip, minister for the co-ordination of defence, confessed to Sir Maurice Hankey, secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence and the Cabinet: 'I wish we had more red-hot information from Spain.'<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For detailed information regarding German weapons shipped to Spain during August and October 1936, see R.L. Proctor, *Hitler's Luftwaffe in the Spanish Civil War* (Westport, CT, 1983), pp. 46–48.

<sup>5</sup> E. Moradiellos, *La perfidia de Albión: El Gobierno británico y la guerra civil española* (Madrid, 1996), pp. 18–24.

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> PRO, WO 106/1577, 'Letter to Gen. Haining from Sir M. Hankey', 8 March 1937.

After years of apocalyptic predictions regarding the future uses and effects of air power,<sup>8</sup> British, French, German, Italian and Soviet military planners finally had the opportunity to analyse how the new weaponry might affect warfare, and most importantly to ascertain how air power might be employed in a wider European conflict. The involvement of German armed forces in Spain was of great interest to British military intelligence, as it enabled an assessment of how Germany might operate in a future European war. Before the Spanish civil war it was widely believed that the primary role of Germany's Luftwaffe would be strategic bombing, a hypothesis rooted in Germany's air raids against London during the First World War.

Britain's main concern at this time was to determine whether Germany would be capable of delivering a 'knock-out-blow' from the air if Europe were once again engulfed by major war. This helps to explain why the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), formed in 1936, decided to create a subcommittee, JIC(S), in June 1937 to consider air warfare in Spain. The subcommittee's main task was to collect and analyse all intelligence regarding air warfare and its effects on land and sea warfare. The JIC devised an assessment framework for the JIC(S) that required the gathering of intelligence on the composition, organization, tactics, equipment and personnel of the air forces and anti-aircraft defences in question. This was to be complemented by an analysis of attacks against naval objectives and the role of air power in close air support, air combat, and strategic and tactical bombing.

Based on recently declassified documents, this article will suggest that prejudices shared by large parts of the British establishment were instrumental in influencing the conclusions drawn from the Spanish civil war. This, together with a tendency to interpret military operations in Spain in such a way that they supported an existing policy and/or strategy, made British military planners blind to what the Germans were learning in Spain. Vital information which could have been gained through observation and analysis of the Spanish civil war was instead learnt the hard way by Britain and its troops in May 1940. By examining how and by whom the intelligence was gathered and evaluated, as well as looking at the domestic politics and logistical problems involved, this article will further develop the analysis of more subjective factors, such as stereotypes and First World War memories, that may have influenced the reading of intelligence reports and the conclusions that were subsequently drawn from them.

## I

From July 1936 to March 1939 the gathering of air warfare intelligence from Spain was conducted with varying degrees of dedication and

<sup>8</sup> U. Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber: The Fear of Air Attack and British Politics, 1932-1939* (London, 1980), p. 3.

professionalism, depending on the economic, political and strategic debates taking place at the time. Intelligence reports reached the British government through various sources, though the three main providers were the western European branches of the Air Ministry Intelligence Directorate (DDI3), the War Office Directorate of Military Operations and Intelligence (MI3), and the diplomatic corps attached to British embassies and consulates in France and Spain. Clashes between the Foreign Office, Air Ministry and War Office often arose as each ministry tended to extract lessons from the Spanish civil war which supported and justified their own understanding of what British military strategy should be.

Although many reports were received regarding Spain, complaints about the difficulties of obtaining the right kind of detailed military intelligence were very common. Wing Commander R.V. Goddard, who was in charge of the collection and organization of intelligence coming to the Air Ministry from Spain, prior to the creation of the JIC(S), highlighted this issue in his reply to Wing Commander Fraser, Defence Plans Sub-Committee, in October 1936:<sup>9</sup>

You asked me for some notes on the effects of bombing in Spain. The enclosed papers do not provide what you want but if you will glance through them you will see the nakedness of the land of intelligence useful to Plans. This is inevitable in a war in which we have no active agents and no means of linking up, e.g. bombing with bombing effects. We do not know anything worth knowing about bombing effects and I am going to try and improve our sources of information in time to get something useful out of the impending attack on Madrid.<sup>10</sup>

At times it was the delicate political situation that hindered intelligence. As Major General Sir Robert Haining, director of Military Operations and Intelligence, wrote to Sir Maurice Hankey<sup>11</sup> on 8 March 1937:

We have a lot of information about Spain though we are inclined at times to get it a bit late because the *Foreign Office have consistently opposed our having anybody with Franco in a military capacity* [...]. There is always a great tendency to be politically minded in intelligence and I do not think it is our job, and undoubtedly overtakes our capacity for production of military knowledge. [...] If I get anything of interest I will send it to you, privately if it is political and not military, but as I say, we are handicapped in our technical needs in the absence of a trained military observer.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Goddard was also head of DDI3 from July 1936 until January 1939.

<sup>10</sup> PRO, AIR 40/219, 'Notes on Air Employment in the Spanish Civil War', 1 October 1936.

<sup>11</sup> At that time Sir Maurice Hankey still supported the army's continental commitment; however, he changed his stance during the latter half of 1937. See Bond, *British Military Policy*, p. 257.

<sup>12</sup> PRO, WO 106/1577, 'Sources of Information (Enquiry from Sir Maurice Hankey)', 9 March 1937. Italics added.

The task of the JIC(S), chaired by Goddard, 'was to arrive at the truth with respect to any lessons to be learnt regarding air warfare in Spain, so far as this might be possible taking [into] consideration the limited scope of the air operations in the Civil War'.<sup>13</sup> Its creation was a logical step towards the merging of all channels of intelligence gathering (Foreign Office, Military Intelligence, and Air Intelligence), and therefore to avoid disinformation between ministries. However, rather than creating a unified focus point, the JIC(S) meetings instead reflected the frequent clashes between ministries, especially the Air Ministry and War Office, regarding the role the air force should play within British military strategy. This tendency to see the Spanish civil war through the 'lens' of British military strategy can be observed in the JIC(S) reports 'Anti-Aircraft (Artillery) Defence', 'Low Flying Attack on Land Forces' and 'Effects of Air Attack on Fuel Oil Storage', which were submitted to the chiefs of staff for examination at their 219th meeting.<sup>14</sup>

The first of these reports concluded that the use of aerial defence in Spain fell 'far short of what should be expected from first class Powers', and seemingly demonstrated the futility of drawing any lessons from the use of air defences in Spain. Despite this the report was still confident that British defence policies were justified. It stated that 'the evidence available though admittedly incomplete, supports the theory that A.A. artillery is a prime factor in the maintenance of air superiority in that it offers local protection to aerodromes and permits the Fighters, working from their own bases, to deal with enemy bombers'.<sup>15</sup>

The second report, 'Low Flying Attack on Land Forces', highlighted tensions between the army and the Royal Air Force (RAF). The latter wished to operate independently from the tactical battlefield, whereas the former wanted the air force to help with close air support. According to the report:

The combination of the noise of these weapons with the distracting or even terrifying roar of diving and zooming aircraft close overhead, produces *demoralization out of all proportion to the casualties inflicted*. It is undoubtedly more effective in battle than bombing alone, especially high bombing. But these low attacks are hazardous and result in higher aircraft casualties than would be the case if bombing attacks were conducted at a safe height.<sup>16</sup>

Disputes over strategy became more open by mid-1938, when the Third Reich's annexation of Austria increased what Watt described as

<sup>13</sup> PRO, CAB 56/5, 1st Meeting JIC(S), 30 June 1937.

<sup>14</sup> PRO, CAB 56/3, JIC Paper No. 40, 'Spain - Intelligence regarding Air Warfare, Report No. 1: Anti-Aircraft (Artillery) Defence', 6 October 1937; JIC Paper No. 42, 'Report No. 4: Low Flying Attack on Land Forces', 6 October 1937; JIC Paper No. 49, 'Report No. 5: Effects of Air Attack on Fuel Oil Storage', 25 April 1938.

<sup>15</sup> PRO, CAB 56/3, JIC Paper No. 40, 'Spain - Intelligence regarding Air Warfare, Report No. 1: Anti-Aircraft (Artillery) Defence', 6 October 1937.

<sup>16</sup> PRO, CAB 56/3, JIC Paper No. 42: 'Report No. 4: Low Flying Attack on Land Forces', 6 October 1937. Italics added.

the 'black pessimism' of the chiefs of staff.<sup>17</sup> Fearing that the UK was on the brink of war following Germany's threats against Czechoslovakia, the cabinet decided that defending British air space should be its chief priority, as its armed forces were far from ready for a continental campaign or for defending Britain from a possibly devastating German air attack. This meant that the production of fighters had to be prioritized over bombers,<sup>18</sup> something the Air Staff, deeply convinced of the air force's strategic role, did not agree with. This 'tactical vs. strategic' air power debate also affected the understanding of developments in Spanish skies. A perfect illustration of how intelligence from Spain was being adapted in accordance with the RAF's long-range strategic doctrine can be seen in Goddard's conclusive report on air warfare written during his visit to Republican Spain in February 1938. He expressed the Air Ministry's opinion by reporting that:

Air effort has been dissipated over a wide range of objectives instead of concentrated time and again on certain important objectives to ensure their destruction or the demoralisation of local personnel. [...] The salient feature of the war seems to be that, where armies are engaged, Air Forces become very much tied to Army tactical requirements, unless means are found *to employ Air Forces in a definite and decisive strategic role*.<sup>19</sup>

All these inter-arms 'struggles' over doctrine and procurement meant that the essential purpose of collecting intelligence from the Spanish arena which elucidated the Germans' and Italian' tactical doctrine, and how they were using their weapons and combat organization, was neglected. The lack of agreement over a common tactical doctrine between the different armed services was aggravated by the political inability to decide the guidelines for their grand strategy. The response to Goddard's report by the Foreign Office demonstrates how intelligence reports were disregarded if they directly contradicted the policies of the ministry receiving them. In his letter to Goddard on 28 March 1938, Walter Roberts, director of the Western Europe Department of the Foreign Office, wrote in a seemingly condescending tone:

The facts and conclusions in regard to air operations in Spain presented in the Report cannot fail to be extremely useful to your Chiefs, though of course I am not competent to express an opinion on that point and should not really do so, but I can assure you that those parts of the Report which deal more generally with the Civil War in its present phase are a most useful addition to our stock of information on the subject.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Watt, *Too Serious a Business*, p. 131.

<sup>18</sup> Bond, *British Military Policy*, p. 262.

<sup>19</sup> PRO, AIR 2/3261, 'Republican Spain: Visit of Air Staff Officers in February 1938'. Italics added.

<sup>20</sup> PRO, AIR 2/3261, 'W 3987/1245/41: Letter by Walter Roberts from FO to Goddard', 28 March 1938.

If other ministries were suspicious of Air Ministry intelligence because of what Watt describes as some leading civil servants' 'low opinion of the judgement and character of the Air Staff',<sup>21</sup> it is perhaps not surprising then that the Foreign Office bypassed the JIC and started to gather its own intelligence on air warfare. This was achieved by using the League of Nations to create a 'Commission for the Investigation of Air Bombardment in Spain' in September 1938. Under this guise Wing Commander J.R.W. Smyth-Pigott, a retired First World War Royal Naval Air Service officer and air attaché to the British embassy in Paris in 1926, helped by Major F.B. Lejeune, Royal Artillery, was appointed to gather intelligence. The Foreign Office's intention was clear: to use reports on air bombardment to support its policy of air defence rearmament. As Lord Halifax, the then foreign secretary, explained to Pigott in September 1938:

In appointing the commission we had it not so much in mind that your reports would immediately stop these attacks but [...] that the publicity given to your reports would gradually influence public opinion as a whole in such a way as to place attacks of this nature for future time beyond the pale of civilised warfare.<sup>22</sup>

The urgency of preparing British air defences was also to affect the work of the JIC and the JIC(S). Nervous tension had increased by mid-1938 as Chamberlain's Great Britain's Air Defence (GBAD) programme, which had been given priority over the rearmament of the regular army, was seriously behind schedule. As a result the bodies preparing British air defences, such as the Air Raid Precautions Department (ARPD), were under pressure and badly needed the latest details of the effects of German air power in Spain. During the fourth JIC(S) meeting on 2 March 1938, a letter sent by the ARPD complaining about the lack of progress in the study of air-raid precautions in Spain was discussed.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the Bombing and Anti-aircraft Gunfire Experiments Subcommittee (BAAE) also expressed its exasperation that it 'had been sitting for a year and a half, [while] the civil war in Spain had been in progress for two years',<sup>24</sup> but had obtained no useful technical data from the JIC(S). Lieutenant General Sir Hugh J. Elles, chairman of the BAAE, who already knew of the JIC and its subcommittee's complaints about the absence of professional observers, wrote a letter to General Lord Ismay, deputy secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), on 8 June 1938 expressing his concerns:

Whilst the compilation of the [JIC Paper No. 48: Air Attacks on Ships in Spain] had evidently involved a great amount of labour, its practical

<sup>21</sup> D.C. Watt, 'British Intelligence and the Coming of the Second World War in Europe', in E.R. May, ed., *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars* (Princeton, 1984), p. 255.

<sup>22</sup> IWM, Documents Department, 70/9/1, Gp/Capt J.R.W. Smyth-Pigott, Letter from Halifax to Pigott.

<sup>23</sup> PRO, CAB 56/5, 4th JIC(S), 2 March 1938.

<sup>24</sup> PRO, CAB 56/1, 18th JIC, 8 July 1938.

value was almost negligible owing to the fact that records of the essential factors [...] are seldom ascertained. [...] If any reliable lessons are to be drawn from the anti-aircraft activities in Spain or elsewhere it is essential that trained observers should be employed [...]. The Sub-Committee therefore recommend that the [CID] be asked to draw the attention of the Service Departments to what appears to them to be a serious gap in our Intelligence Services.<sup>25</sup>

Having received a copy of this letter, the JIC invited General Elles to attend their 18th meeting on 8 July 1938. Elles expressed his dissatisfaction with the subcommittee and doubted the explanation that they could not collect information from Franco's forces, pointing out that the 'Press representatives seemed able to penetrate most parts of Spain'. He then suggested that 'an individual [accredited or as a spy] should be sent to General Franco's side with real anti-aircraft knowledge'.<sup>26</sup> This need for valuable technical information which might have helped to prepare British air defences was reinforced by those bodies, such as the Admiralty, that strongly believed that the only constructive information to be extracted from the Spanish civil war was the technical details of German and Italian weaponry. For example, the JIC(S) Admiralty representative, Commander Johnstone, expressed the view of his ministry when he stated that 'reports should be confined to facts'.<sup>27</sup>

However, Goddard defended a greater emphasis on the analysis of the impact of weaponry by replying that, in his opinion, the 'Sub-Committee was required to assess the value of the information and draw conclusions and deductions from it. In any event it was impossible to limit themselves to facts for, as every one knew, the greater part of the information was not fact, indeed very little of it was.'<sup>28</sup> Another problem of the 'facts only' approach was, as Brigadier R. Evans (War Office, deputy director of Military Operations and Intelligence (DDMI)) commented during the JIC's 17th meeting, that records of essential factors, such as the speed and height of aircraft, and the details of anti-aircraft methods, 'were to a large extent virtually unobtainable'.<sup>29</sup> In response to this inconvenience, Rear Admiral J.A.G. Troup, director of Naval Intelligence (NID), proposed that:

[As] this country had not, in the past, stood to gain much from detailed technical intelligence [it] was open to doubt whether we should get real value from spending large sums of money collecting intelligence. For instance, if say £100,000 was spent, should we obtain £100,000 worth of technical data? Surely it would be better to spend the money on scientific research in this country.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> PRO, CAB 56/1, 16th JIC, Annex JIC Paper No. 69, 3 June 1938.

<sup>26</sup> PRO, CAB 56/1, 16th JIC, 'Intelligence regarding Air Warfare', 3 June 1938.

<sup>27</sup> PRO, CAB 56/5, 2nd JIC(S), 17 September 1937.

<sup>28</sup> PRO, CAB 56/5, 2nd JIC(S), 17 September 1937.

<sup>29</sup> PRO, CAB 56/1, 17th JIC, 15 June 1938.

<sup>30</sup> PRO, CAB 56/1, 18th JIC, 8 July 1938.

This concern over the technical aspects of new weaponry and tactics being tested in Spain was just the tip of a bigger and more difficult problem: how to act on the conclusions reached by intelligence reports. This issue was discussed during the JIC's 21st meeting. Group Captain Buss (Air Ministry, deputy director of Intelligence (DDI)) explained that 'it was not only a matter of collecting and collation but also of deciding what use could be made of the information'.<sup>31</sup> That is to say, depending on who read a report and in which way they chose to use it, a thorough analysis of warfare in Spain could either demonstrate the erroneous assumptions on which British strategy was based, or support them.

Yet after three years of war in Spain from which the British had collected copious amounts of military intelligence, the Spanish civil war had still had no perceptible effect on British rearmament or strategy. If anything the intelligence served to reaffirm Britain's fears of an all-out German air attack. This would explain why the imperial defence strategy in October 1937 prioritized the protection of Britain, and imperial communication lines and territorial possessions, over a commitment on the continent.<sup>32</sup> The British military refused to acknowledge that the best results of the German and Italian air forces in Spain always took place when supporting ground forces on the battlefield, and that air raids against Republican urban areas never resulted in swift victories because of demoralization, as prophesied by the Italian air theorist Giulio Douhet. British intelligence believed that in a war between first world powers with large air forces, the potential demoralization of the urban population would be so great that the tactical use of air power would be of secondary importance to the overall war strategy. This, as Goddard explained, was a question of numbers: 'the scope of air warfare in Spain is very limited and it might be found, as a result, that the lessons to be learned are, in many respects, either entirely lacking or negligible'.<sup>33</sup>

## II

The reason for the repeated dismissal of the Spanish civil war as an event to learn from can be found in something most state machineries cannot fight: blind prejudice, both conscious and unconscious. Three key factors provide explanations. First and foremost an unquestioning belief in stereotypes which often resulted in poor intelligence; second, the constant and unhelpful comparisons made with the First World War; third, overconfidence in the quality and experience of the British armed forces, which led to the perception of the Spanish civil war as a 'second-class-power' war. In addition, these factors were aggravated by

<sup>31</sup> PRO, CAB 56/1, 21st JIC, 11 February 1939.

<sup>32</sup> Bond, *British Military Policy*, pp. 257–58.

<sup>33</sup> PRO, CAB 56/1, 9th JIC, 26 May 1937.

the aforementioned 'struggles' over strategy and procurement between ministries, especially the Air Ministry and War Office.

Policy-making and military planning in 1930s Britain was still undertaken by what Michael Dockrill describes as 'a relatively small and tight-knit group [of] politicians, senior officers and other members of the elite',<sup>34</sup> whose preconceptions had a key influence over the analysis of British intelligence gathered during the Spanish civil war. Liking the Bolshevik revolution and Russian civil war of 1918–21 to the events in Spain is one such example. This interpretation was partly influenced and perpetuated by the British right-wing press, the newsreel's stress on the negative anti-clerical aspects of the Republicans and a tendency to side with the rebels.<sup>35</sup> The 'red' Republican Army was portrayed as fighting against the 'anti-red' rebels, who were labelled the 'white army', with Franco as head of the anti-communist crusade. The propagation of these biased opinions within the military establishment was enormously helped by the famous military theorist Major General J.F.C. Fuller. He visited Spain on various occasions during the civil war, and his views were considered as authoritative and well respected inside the military. The impressions gained during his visit to Nationalist Spain in March 1937 were sent to the War Office. His understanding of the strategy of the 'Reds' as 'first to assassinate their class opponents, and secondly, through their violent propaganda, to terrify the civil inhabitants into believing that Franco would do likewise wherever he advanced',<sup>36</sup> was well appreciated within the intelligence body. Proof of this was Brigadier D.F. Anderson (DDMI), who, having read and extracted any valuable conclusions from this report, then handed it to Field Marshal Cyril Deverell, the chief of the Imperial General Staff, who described it as 'a most interesting account of the Spanish civil war from General Fuller. It has the merit of being less partisan than the majority of the reports which we have received; [and] obviously of greater value.'<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Fuller even wrote in widely read military journals such as the *Army Quarterly*, where he continued to express his view of 'a war from which not much of a tactical nature is to be learnt, but which politically is most self-revealing: [...] a clash between two financial systems'.<sup>38</sup> With such reports being considered as 'less partisan', it is no surprise that by 1938 it was widely assumed that as a civil and ideological conflict

<sup>34</sup> M. Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives on France* (London, 1999), p. ix.

<sup>35</sup> E. Moradiellos, 'The Gentle General: The Official British Perception of General Franco during the Spanish Civil War', in P. Preston and A.L. Mackenzie, eds, *The Republic Besieged: Civil War in Spain, 1936–1939* (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 5. Also, T. Aldgate, 'British Newsreel and the Spanish Civil War', *History* LVIII (1973), p. 62.

<sup>36</sup> PRO, WO 106/1578, 'Report by J.F.C. Fuller on Visit to General Franco's Army in March 1937'.

<sup>37</sup> PRO, WO 106/1578, Minute MI3/4372: 'CIGS: D.F. Anderson Commenting on Fuller's Report', 2 April 1937.

<sup>38</sup> J.F.C. Fuller, 'The Soviet-Spanish War of September 1938', *Army Quarterly* XXXVII (1939), pp. 320–21.

the Spanish civil war was of little relevance to the British. As Group Captain D. Colyer, Paris air attaché, asserted:

[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.<sup>39</sup>

The British view of the Republican forces was greatly influenced by initial reports coming from diplomatic sources in 1936, such as the US military attaché who visited the Talavera front and described a ‘scene of confusion and indiscipline in the Government Forces’.<sup>40</sup> The Nationalist Army was seen as equally poorly trained, as Fuller described in his first report:

The damage done by bombing is insignificant [...]. I think this is partially due to the desultory nature of these operations, to targets being small and airmen poorly trained. [...] *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>41</sup>

This impression remained persistent throughout 1937. Wing Commander A. James, on visiting Franco’s divisional headquarters, commented: ‘There were plenty of maps, telephones, in fact all the paraphernalia of staff work. But whether the telephones would function, and the order which they would have conveyed have been obeyed is quite a different matter.’<sup>42</sup> These first impressions of the early stages of the Spanish civil war left a lasting notion of forces on both sides as undisciplined, revolutionary, lacking training and demoralized. This was further exacerbated by the belief in the stereotypically lazy, backwards and indomitable Spaniard, as Wing Commander A. James discovered during his visit to Franco’s Spain in October 1937, when he stated that, ‘although the morale in White Spain is very high, Franco’s main obstacle is the Spanish national temperament. These people will

<sup>39</sup> PRO, AIR 2/3289, ‘Report on Visit of Air Attachés to Nationalist Spain, 13–24 April 1938’, Letter from Gp/Capt D. Colyer, Paris Air Attaché, to Sir Robert Hodgson, British Agency in Burgos, p. 27.

<sup>40</sup> PRO, WO 106/1576, ‘Spanish Civil War. No. 12 (Prepared by MI3a)’, 23 September 1936.

<sup>41</sup> PRO, WO 106/1578, ‘Report by J.F.C. Fuller on Visit to General Franco’s Army in Spain, March 1937’. Fuller sent two more reports on Spain: see WO 106/1579, ‘Major-General Fuller’s Visit to Nationalist Spain, October 1937, to Field-Marshal Cyril Deverell (CIGS)’, and WO 106/1585, ‘Fuller in Spain, April 1938’. Italics added.

<sup>42</sup> PRO, WO 1061/1581, ‘W/Cmdr A. James M.P. on His Visit to Franco’s Spain, October 1937’.

not learn anything [and] will probably keep on making the same mistakes in the military art.’<sup>43</sup>

The danger of using character stereotypes that resulted in gross oversimplifications and subsequent underestimation of the potential lessons for the British can clearly be seen in J.M. Walsh’s report to Walter Roberts, under-secretary of state, regarding raid effects on Valencia in December 1938:

[Experience] in Spain is likely to furnish little information on what may be expected to be the indirect effects of bombardments by a competent enemy possessed of adequate means to keep a sustained attack. [...] The truth is that, [...], conditions here are nothing like those mentioned by Mr. Spaight, if only because the ‘hot-blooded Spaniard’ is an immeasurably less impressionable fellow than the ‘stolid Englishman’.<sup>44</sup>

It was policy ‘that reports by individuals who visit one or other of the opposing sides cannot be regarded as conclusive evidence, since the views expressed are liable to be influenced by their sympathies’.<sup>45</sup> In accordance with this, professional intelligence staff were required to pay serious consideration only to information from their own agents. However, professional intelligence was often unprofessional and therefore just as likely to employ stereotypes and be biased by their sympathies. One such example is the report of Goddard and Squadron Leader Pearson, who, having visited Republican Spain in February 1938 to collect information on the employment of air forces, bombing, tactical air lessons and so forth, stated:

Finally, it must be hard for people of a gay temperament to take a morbid view of things in the sunshine which seems to prevail nine days out of ten in Spain. *The shattered steel works at Sagunto would have seemed very depressing in the wet and gloom of Sheffield, but in Spain it was not so.*<sup>46</sup>

Those who had experienced the First World War did not hesitate in drawing parallels between their memories and experiences and the war in Spain. Recalling his first trip to Spain in March 1937, Fuller wrote: ‘The front is totally unlike the fronts in the World War. Not only is it in no way continuous, but, generally speaking, hard to discover,

<sup>43</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> PRO, CAB 56/6, 6th JIC(A), ‘Appendix XVI: Report on the Effects of Air Raids, Valencia. Report No. 1: Air Attack on Sea Communications during the Spanish Civil War, July 1936 to Nov 1938, and the Sino-Japanese Hostilities, July 1937 to Nov 1938’, 7 December 1938. J.M. Spaight was a well-known air theorist and semi-official legal adviser to the Air Ministry, who during the 1930s defended the idea of maximum air rearmament so ‘the nations may fear to unleash the monsters they have bred’. See M. Smith, *British Air Strategy between the Wars* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 49–50.

<sup>45</sup> PRO, WO 106/1579, ‘Comments by MI3 on Major-General Fuller’s Report, October 1937, To Field-Marshal Cyril Deverell (CIGS)’.

<sup>46</sup> PRO, AIR 2/3261, ‘Republican Spain: Visit of Air Staff Officers, February 1938’. Italics added.

and during my journey, so far as I know, at times I may have been in Red Territory.<sup>47</sup> This tendency to compare was intensified as British intelligence bodies frequently employed retired officers, who tended to view modern warfare in terms of their recollections of the First World War. Furthermore, the intense debate during the 1920s and early 1930s on the mechanization of the British cavalry<sup>48</sup> was still very much alive during the Spanish civil war, and it was logical that some cavalry officers looked towards Spain in the hope that it would justify some use of the horse. A good illustration is the report on Franco's army sent to the War Office in May 1938 by Lieutenant Colonel A.F.G. Renton, a former 11th Hussar and 'keen horse-man':

Judging from the effective way Franco's A.T. gunners dealt with small parties of light tanks, it appears that the leading light tank of a patrol is always very likely to be hit, cease to function and send no information back, thus making the light tank patrol [...] an ineffective substitute for the cavalry patrol of eight, where when the two leading points are fired on it is quite usual for nobody to be hit.<sup>49</sup>

The result of these comparisons was a tendency to question the relevance of warfare in Spain, as it was assumed that modern weapons were being used with a First World War mentality. For example, the rapid evolution of air power meant that for most the use of air power in Spain could not be compared with their own experiences and knowledge. They tended, however, to take 'refuge' in the belief that air warfare in Spain 'may not be as intensive or as highly technical as that which may be visualised in a future war between first class European Powers'.<sup>50</sup>

In the case of British intelligence and its reading of the Spanish civil war, this predisposition to disregard conflicts involving so called second-rate powers was not always the result of overconfidence in British equipment and technical knowledge. Rather it was a perception of the ethos and preparation of their own armed forces, as Major E.C. Richards, assistant military attaché to Barcelona, showed in 1938 when he described to MI3 'the not very high mental level or standard of professional knowledge amongst the majority of officers of the [Intelligence Section of the Army of Levant] with which I have to deal'.<sup>51</sup> As victors of the First World War with an empire that had reached its 'finest hour',<sup>52</sup> the

<sup>47</sup> PRO, WO 106/1578, 'Report by J.F.C. Fuller on Visit to General Franco's Army in Spain, March 1937'.

<sup>48</sup> D. French, 'The Mechanization of the British Cavalry between the World Wars', *War in History* X (2003), pp. 296–320.

<sup>49</sup> PRO, WO 106/1583, 'Lt Col A.F.G. Renton: Some Impressions of the Nationalist Army, May 1938'.

<sup>50</sup> PRO, CAB 56/2, JIC Paper No. 32, 'Spain – Intelligence regarding Air Warfare: Copy of a letter dated 17 March, 1937, from the Admiralty to the FO, HO, WO, AM and CID', 22 April 1937.

<sup>51</sup> PRO, CAB 56/6, 3rd JIC(A), 'From Major E.C. Richards, Assistant Military Attaché Barcelona, to M.I.3, 24 August 1938', 19 December 1938.

<sup>52</sup> M. Howard, *The Continental Commitment: The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of Two World Wars* (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 74.

British military was convinced of its superiority and therefore considered the 'small wars'<sup>53</sup> of the 1930s as second-class conflicts. As the JIC and JIC(S) report 'Low Flying Attack on Land Forces' observed: 'Finally it must be remembered that these attacks have been carried out against troops whose standard of training and morale is lower than that of regular trained troops against whom the effect of such attacks would probably be less great.'<sup>54</sup>

These factors convinced the British military that 'a civil or small war [offered] few lessons of value for a war of masses'.<sup>55</sup> This explains why the intelligence bodies, aware that the latest German equipment was being used in Spain, started to focus on the technical characteristics of this modern equipment, rather than analysing its impact. The JIC Admiralty representative, Captain C.P. Hermon-Hodge, summed up this policy during the 10th JIC meeting when he stated that 'the purpose of the Sub-Committee on Air Warfare in Spain was to present conclusions based upon facts, and not to attempt to draw deductions from those facts'.<sup>56</sup> This deprived the JIC(S) of what could have been one of its most important tools in the process of analysing intelligence: insight.

### III

On 10 May 1940 Nazi Germany launched its attack against the Low Countries and France. After two weeks of fighting, Belgium had capitulated, and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and 1st French Army had been surrounded and were being pushed towards the coastal town of Dunkirk. On 21 June 1940 France surrendered and signed an armistice. The success of the Nazi armed forces came as a shock to the British high command, who had never envisaged such a quick and overwhelming defeat. In his brief account of Operation Dynamo, John Masefield stated that 'the success of the enemy was due to great numbers of aeroplanes, tanks and guns'.<sup>57</sup> It has now been demonstrated that the key reason behind Germany's success in France was the adoption of a military doctrine based on inter-arms co-operation, tactical rather than strategic bombing, motorized infantry and gunnery, and the integration of mobility and fire-power.<sup>58</sup> Most of these techniques were tested for the first time under combat conditions in Spain, where, as the

<sup>53</sup> The Abyssinian war, the SCW, and the Sino-Japanese war. See W.K. Wark, 'British Intelligence and Small Wars in the 1930s', *Intelligence and National Security* II (1987), pp. 67–87.

<sup>54</sup> PRO, CAB 56/3, JIC Paper No. 42, 'Spain – Intelligence regarding Air Warfare, Report No. 4: Low Flying Attack on Land Forces', 6 October 1937.

<sup>55</sup> 'Retrospect of the Spanish Civil War (Compiled from Foreign Sources)', *Army Quarterly* XLI (1940), p. 104.

<sup>56</sup> PRO, CAB 56/1, 10th JIC, 28 September 1937.

<sup>57</sup> J. Masefield, *The Nine Days Wonder (The Operation Dynamo)* (London and Toronto, 1941), p. ix.

<sup>58</sup> H. Strachan, *European Armies*, pp. 150–68.

German 'ace' Galland wrote in his memoirs, 'World War II was being rehearsed on a small scale.'<sup>59</sup>

Throughout its first year, the JIC(S) justified its lack of intelligence regarding German forces by arguing that it did not have access to Franco's Spain. However, by November 1937 the British government had recognized the Nationalist administration as the *de facto* government. An exchange of diplomatic agents between London and Burgos (the capital of Nationalist Spain) followed, facilitating British intelligence attempts to gather technical information on German and Italian weaponry.<sup>60</sup> These good relations between London and Franco reached their peak in June 1938 when Franco wrote to Chamberlain expressing his gratitude for Britain's pressure on France to completely close its southern border to Soviet material destined for Republican Spain. However, this new opportunity to gather intelligence did not improve analysis of the Spanish civil war, as one of the final reports written by the JIC(A) in February 1939 demonstrates.<sup>61</sup> It persisted in the belief that warfare as experienced in Spain provided no valid lessons for first world powers, and reasserted that 'since neither Spain nor China were industrialised [...] attacks on the national economy as a whole were impracticable'.<sup>62</sup>

Despite claims to the contrary, British Air Intelligence had in fact received a 44-page report in February 1937 from a British subject serving with the Nationalist forces that would have proved extremely useful if analysed in depth. The content and technical details in this report outclass all previous and future intelligence received during the Spanish civil war. It consisted of a lengthy questionnaire passed by the Western Europe Air Intelligence Office (AI3) to Mr William Winterbottom,<sup>63</sup> who, having fought on Franco's side, answered questions regarding the organization, air operations (bombing, air fighting and reconnaissance), aircraft and equipment, night flying and army co-operation of the German, Italian and Nationalist air forces. In addition he mentioned the united air control procedures, anti-aircraft defence organization, material,

<sup>59</sup> A. Galland, *The First and the Last*, trans. M. Savill (London, 1973), p. 23.

<sup>60</sup> Moradiellos, 'Gentle General', p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> The JIC(S) changed its name and purpose in October 1938 when it was ordered to cover air warfare in the Sino-Japanese war as well, becoming the Sub-Committee on Air Warfare, JIC(A).

<sup>62</sup> PRO, CAB 56/6, 7th JIC(A), 'Report No. 2: Air Co-operation with Land Forces in Operations in Spain from July 1936 to December 1938, and in China from July 1937 to December 1938', 21 February 1939, p. 24.

<sup>63</sup> PRO, AIR 40/224, 'Report by Mr. William Winterbottom of His Experiences whilst Serving with General Franco during the Civil War in Spain', 16 February 1937. His details are given as 'Winterbotham: British subject serving with Spanish insurgent forces: visits to Gibraltar'; however, in the FO Correspondence Index of 1937, this letter is not available. The highly technical analysis in this report could not be the work of someone without professional military experience, although his full name (either Winterbottom or Winterbotham) does not appear in any army, navy, or air force servicemen records. At the top of his report written in pencil one can read: 'AI3. Any use to you? If not, please destroy. (unintelligible signature) for DDI? 26/9.' This indicates that someone from Air Intelligence Staff read it on 26 September 1937, but it was not acted upon (I have found no mention of it anywhere).

results and defence of aerodromes. Had his comments been taken seriously they could have given the British military vital clues as to how the Spanish civil war was influencing German military strategy, something that was later going to prove key in the battle of France.

The main areas of German expertise developed in Spain were precisely those that the Allied forces most lacked in May 1940: army–air co-operation, air support of ground forces, and co-ordination of AA fire and communications. This is why at the beginning of the battle of France the main differences in equipment between the Allied and German forces were the number of dive and medium bombers, and the number of AA guns.<sup>64</sup> Winterbottom's report reveals its worth when compared to much later intelligence reports composed first by the JIC(S) and subsequently by the JIC(A). For example, the JIC report 'Low Flying Attack on Land Forces' underrated the development of air–ground co-operation as well as its effects, concluding that:

Although the tactics employed have not, until latterly, shown close co-ordination between ground and air, although the scale of air attacks have not generally been great, and although the defensive and deceptive measures adopted on both sides have often been negligible, the moral effect of air action against ground forces, when aircraft are employed resolutely in conditions of undisputed air supremacy at the right time and place, has been out of all proportion to the material results achieved.<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, the much later report 'Air Co-operation with Land Forces in Operations in Spain', when analysing the use of air reconnaissance, stated that:

In Spain the obvious and marked success of aircraft as a weapon contributed to the neglect of air reconnaissance. [...] One of the reasons for the surprise which often accompanied major offensives in Spain was that the intelligence staffs apparently failed to make full use of the information, including that from the air, which they received.<sup>66</sup>

In contrast, Winterbottom pointed out that:

[The Condor Legion] are experimenting in wireless on a gigantic scale and claim a fair degree of success, at least results prove so, such

<sup>64</sup> B.R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca and London, 1984), 'Table 2: German and Allied Forces Available in the Battle of France, Phase 1' and 'Table 3: German and Allied Aircraft Engaged in the Battle of France, Phase 1', pp. 83–84. According to this author, Germany had some 280 dive-bombers plus 1100 medium bombers, while the Allies had 49 and 414 respectively, and a predominance of heavy bombers. As for AA guns, the Allied coalition possessed approximately 3800 medium and heavy AA guns against Germany's 9300.

<sup>65</sup> PRO, CAB 56/3, JIC Paper No. 42, 'Report No. 4: Low Flying Attack on Land Forces', 6 October 1937.

<sup>66</sup> PRO, CAB 56/6, 7th JIC(A), 'Report No. 2: Air Co-operation with Land Forces in Operations in Spain from July 1936 to December 1938, and in China from July 1937 to December 1938', 21 February 1939, p. 27.

as machines reporting from the Air Convoys, movement of troops, etc. all to Seville which is in due course passed on or not as the case may be to G.H.Q. Spanish Aviation at 'Salamanca'. [Furthermore] at Seville they also have an excellent Intelligence System, and also a terrific amount of Technical people, designers, who travel from place to place, [and examine] photographs, every machine, bullet holes, etc., even the smallest details. Nothing goes by unnoticed, every defect is studied and remedied at great length, every piece of a machine taken down.<sup>67</sup>

The German 'air-land' experience in Spain proved invaluable, and informed German military doctrine well before their attack against Poland in September 1939. As Galland recalled in his memoirs, 'Berlin [HQ], busy planning a possible air-land operation against Czechoslovakia, [...] suddenly remembered the countless reports of our experiences we Army support fighters had sent from Spain day after day.'<sup>68</sup>

This assimilation of knowledge gained in Spain provided the German armed forces with an operational doctrine based on modern war practice rather than mere speculation. The German development of a 'close air support' doctrine, which, as Murray argues, 'resulted from German experience in Spain',<sup>69</sup> went completely unnoticed by British intelligence. It had, however, already been mentioned by Winterbottom, who pointed out that, although 'the Germans claim that dive bombing is not in any way practical for use in modern warfare', he suspected that 'they are only in the very elementary stages of the same'.<sup>70</sup> The intelligence bodies did know that the German Luftwaffe was experimenting with new aircraft models in Spain, such as the Heinkel He 112B and Messerschmitt Me 109 monoplane fighters and the Heinkel He 111 medium bomber. Nevertheless, they completely failed to notice the experimental Henschel Hs 126 or the Junkers Ju 87 'Stuka' dive-bombers.

Six Hs 126s arrived in Spain in October 1938 and were successfully used for close air support and reconnaissance during the Catalonia campaign in early 1939.<sup>71</sup> Yet it was the Ju 87 that was to terrify the Allied ground forces in 1940 that was tested under operational conditions in Spain. The first Ju 87 was delivered to the experimental fighter squadron based in Tablada, Seville, in November 1936. It was followed

<sup>67</sup> PRO, AIR 40/224, 'Report by Mr. William D. Winterbottom of his Experiences whilst Serving with General Franco during the Civil War in Spain', 16 February 1937, pp. 2-3.

<sup>68</sup> Galland, *First and Last*, p. 35.

<sup>69</sup> W. Murray, 'The Luftwaffe before the Second World War: A Mission, A Strategy?', *Journal of Strategic Studies* IV (1981), p. 262.

<sup>70</sup> PRO, AIR 40/224, 'Report by Mr. William D. Winterbottom of His Experiences whilst Serving with General Franco during the Civil War in Spain', 16 February 1937, p. 14.

<sup>71</sup> G. Howson, *Aircraft of the Spanish Civil War* (London, 1990), pp. 187-88, and pp. 211-12. For an account of the arrival in Spain of the latest German aircraft, see Proctor, *Hitler's Luftwaffe*, pp. 89-95.

by another three equipped with new engines by the end of 1937, seeing action during the battle of Teruel in February 1938. The secrecy surrounding this model and its use in Spain was so successful that British intelligence felt confident enough to state that:

No aircraft was produced in Spain [...], either designed expressly or modified, which was entirely satisfactory for ground attack. [Therefore it is concluded that] in a war between fully equipped modern armies aircraft as a close support weapon will probably have fewer opportunities of attaining such outstanding successes as in [Spain and China].<sup>72</sup>

The most modern German medium bombers used in Spain (Dornier Do 17E, Junkers Ju 86D and the aforementioned He 111B) revealed the absence of strategic four-engine heavy bombers in the German arsenal. This should have made the Air Ministry reconsider its long-range bombing strategy, as the RAF still thought in terms of strategic rather than tactical bombing, and gave no consideration to inter-service co-operation or close-support tactics.<sup>73</sup> As a result the RAF long-range bombers were ordered to attack targets in Germany during May 1940, a strategy that did not help the Allied troops fighting in France and the Low Countries.<sup>74</sup>

The Germans' use of AA measures, which by 1940 were more advanced and superior in numbers to those of the Allied forces, also proved key to their military successes. It is perhaps in this area that Winterbottom's report excels the most. Not only did he explain the technicalities of the guns and their uses, but he also included detailed drawings of the positioning of AA batteries, aircraft and wireless posts, which acted in conjunction with each other to provide a 200 km air-defence perimeter for the city of Salamanca. He also included an exact copy of the air defence 'General Alarm' operational flow chart, which could have assisted the efforts of British planners to structure a joint air defence. His comments on the main air defences of Franco's army are striking when compared with the lack of information emanating from the JIC. In October 1937 the JIC report 'Anti-Aircraft (Artillery) Defence' stated that:

Owing to the stringent secrecy under which the Foreign batteries have been operating, the absence of reliable observers to transmit reports to this country, the lack of any agent with the necessary technical knowledge of the matter, the exaggerated and contradictory claims made by each side, and the unreliable nature of press reports, it has been found impossible to make any positive appreciation of the result of A.A. fire, except in very general terms.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup> PRO, CAB 56/6, 7th JIC(A), 'Report No. 2: Air Co-operation with Land Forces in Operations in Spain from July 1936 to December 1938, and in China from July 1937 to December 1938', 21 February 1939, p. 27.

<sup>73</sup> Bond, *British Military Policy*, p. 322.

<sup>74</sup> Posen, *Sources*, p. 84.

<sup>75</sup> PRO, CAB 56/3, JIC Paper No. 40, 'Report No. 1: Anti-Aircraft (Artillery) Defence', 6 October 1937.

In contrast, Winterbottom's February report clearly shows the degree to which the Germans were experimenting in Spain:

I know only that the later and bigger ones have a system of remote control, sighting being done by a sightseer [*sic*] at a distance from the gun and firing also being done by him. [They] are said to be controlled and fired by electricity, heights are effective up to 3500 metres. All batteries have searchlights of a new pattern which throw a broad beam and somehow one can detect Aircraft very easily and well with these. The Anti-Air Guns also have an adaptor which is claimed to prevent the flash of the gun from the air. This I have never had the opportunity of proving. The listeners are said to be of a new type very effective and delicate sound indeed. They say these have proved a great success and are far superior to anything we have in England. [...] I really believe that they are very far advanced in this form of defence and that all their claims are justified.<sup>76</sup>

This detailed information on German AA defences, which the JIC(S) claimed it was unable to acquire, serves only to reinforce the important lessons the Allied forces could have learnt from the Spanish civil war. The fact that this report was not acted upon is particularly poignant when we consider that a large proportion of the one-quarter of all Britain's aircraft lost in France was due to 'friendly' gunfire, revealing the precarious state in which the Allies found themselves regarding air defence co-ordination.<sup>77</sup>

## IV

On 4 November 1942 the battle of El Alamein came to an end. That morning, with Rommel's army in full retreat, Montgomery's 8th Army captured the commander of the Afrika Korps, General Ritter von Thoma. During that night, Montgomery and Thoma talked about the development of the battle, the tactics used, the intelligence gathered, the loss of equipment and men, and Spain. In the press conference that followed, Montgomery confessed to the people congregated in his tent his surprise when he found out that Thoma had been in command of the German tank battalion (*Drohne*) that fought with Franco's Nationalist forces.<sup>78</sup> Here Thoma had put into practice his theoretical knowledge of armoured warfare. This was later confirmed when B.H. Liddell Hart interviewed Thoma in 1948, and he admitted that between Poland and

<sup>76</sup> PRO, AIR 40/224, 'Report by Mr. William D. Winterbottom of His Experiences whilst Serving with General Franco during the Civil War in Spain', 16 February 1937.

<sup>77</sup> A press cutting by B. Bond, 'Air versus Land', *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 August 1982, found in the LHCMA's book by R.V. Goddard, *Skies To Dunkirk* (1982).

<sup>78</sup> A total of 10 officers and 225 men, 41 tanks (Mark I) and armoured vehicles, 20 PAK (anti-tank cannons), 8 20 mm cannons and 10 *Kübelwagen* (a Jeep-like vehicle). See Proctor, *Hitler's Luftwaffe*, p. 42.

Africa he took part in only 24 tank battles, but that he 'managed to fight in 192 tank actions during the Spanish civil war'.<sup>79</sup>

William Forrest, a war correspondent who had covered the war in Spain for the *Daily Express* and the *News Chronicle*, attended the press conference in Africa in November 1942. When interviewed in 1992 for the Imperial War Museum Oral History Project on the Spanish civil war, he still remembered with irony what he had heard: 'Montgomery said that as if he'd learned that for the first time but it was something that I and other correspondents in Spain could have told him six years before.'<sup>80</sup> Similar bitter comments recur repeatedly in the accounts of those British people who, whatever their convictions and ideologies, went to Spain to fight against Franco and his Nazi and Fascist allies. These men felt that the British authorities had always underestimated the importance of the Spanish civil war.

It was in Spain that the German Luftwaffe gained experience of air-ground communications, aerial reconnaissance and weather predictions, night and diving bombardment, inter-arms co-operation, and so forth. Before the Spanish civil war, as Williamson Murray notes, these techniques 'either did not exist or had not yet been employed'.<sup>81</sup> By the end of the German involvement some 19,000 Germans had served in Spain. These officers, soldiers and technicians then provided the quickly growing German armed forces with fundamental knowledge of modern warfare after years of isolation and a forcibly reduced army. Their experiences, for example on the development of Captain Mölders's revolutionary aerial fighter tactics,<sup>82</sup> were vital to the Luftwaffe in preparing for the Second World War.

An article written by J.P. Harris in 1991 concludes that:

considering the very limited means of collecting information at its disposal, the British general staff had formed, as early as November 1934, an extraordinarily good picture of the way in which military doctrine in Germany was likely to develop and [how they] were likely to operate in the opening stages of a future war.<sup>83</sup>

This proves extremely difficult to sustain in the case of the Spanish civil war and its analysis by British intelligence. Not only was there easy access to Franco's Spain following Britain's recognition of Franco's government in November 1937, but there were also thousands of Britons who fought in Spain. Reports such as that by Winterbottom, and the personal experiences of British members of the International Brigades, were completely disregarded. Christopher Thorneycroft, having fought for

<sup>79</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill: Germany's Generals, Their Rise and Fall, with Their Own Account of Military Events* (London, 1999), p. 246.

<sup>80</sup> IWM Sound Archive, accession no. 12416/4/4, The Spanish Civil War Collection, William Forrest, Reel 4.

<sup>81</sup> Murray, 'Luftwaffe before the Second World War', p. 263.

<sup>82</sup> Proctor, *Hitler's Luftwaffe*, p. 256.

<sup>83</sup> J.P. Harris, 'British Military Intelligence and the Rise of German Mechanized Forces, 1929-40', *Intelligence and National Security* VI (1991), p. 414.

the Republic as an infantryman, armourer and mechanical engineer from October 1936 to April 1938, recalled British reluctance to learn the military lessons of Spain:

I had frustrating experiences in trying to tell British people on my return about how you handle a dive-bomber, what you do under certain circumstances – they just didn't want to know. It's not just a case of shooting the messenger but if the messenger has got the wrong political label attached to him you're reluctant to listen to what he says.<sup>84</sup>

British intelligence not only failed to take notice of the methods developed during three years of war, it also disregarded the military value of the Spanish forces interned in French concentration camps. For example, in May 1939 Brigadier John N. Kennedy, director of plans, War Office, and Group Captain J.C. Slessor, director of plans, Air Ministry, both received a letter from Captain V.H. Danckwerts, Plans Division Admiralty, in which it was stated that:

Mr Peter Rodd (son of Sir Rennell Rodd, late Ambassador in Rome) recently came from Spain where he was a member of the Committee assisting Spanish refugees now in concentration camps in France. He makes the suggestion that a division of first class, trustworthy, experienced troops, fully staffed with generals and officers, could be picked from the 270,000 Spanish Republican troops in France. There are also 400 pilots for aircraft and a well-disciplined ground staff.<sup>85</sup>

This was politically and militarily impossible. As Hore-Belisha, secretary of state for war explained to Parliament:

commissions in the Royal Air Force were granted only to men whose parents on both sides were British [...] [T]here would be great difficulties in the way of taking foreign officers into the Air Force, [and that] Spanish Units should be formed under British auspices, also presented difficulties because we have no Foreign Legion.<sup>86</sup>

However, this explanation seems rather odd from the intelligence point of view, whose only interest lay in the collection of information on how to fight the German fighters or the air-land communications and co-ordination. Of course this information could have been obtained without having to enlist Republican officers or pilots. As a result, well-trained Republican soldiers' and pilots' experience and knowledge of fighting Nazis and Fascists were lost, even though they had been acquired through three years of war.

<sup>84</sup> IWM Sound Archive, accession no. 12932/3, The Spanish Civil War Collection, Christopher Thorneycroft, Reel 2.

<sup>85</sup> PRO, AIR 40/223, 'Spanish Republican Air Force – Questions of Service with RAF, 12-19.5.39'.

<sup>86</sup> Op. cit.

Although Wesley K. Wark is right in describing British intelligence as ‘too wedded to strategic orthodoxy and the vision of total war’, his assertion that the JIC(S) was correct in depicting the Spanish civil war as ‘marginal [in the] employment of advanced military technology’<sup>87</sup> seems contradictory in the face of evidence that British intelligence knew that the latest German aircraft, the Me 109 and He 111, as well as the 105, 88, 37 and 20 mm AA and AT guns, were all being tested in Spain. The problem was that, while German weaponry greatly benefited from the Spanish experience, the Allies were unable to test their own weapons under war conditions. This sentiment was expressed by General Elles, who had commanded the Tank Corps in France in 1917–19. He was well aware that, in times of peace, the professional soldier can only learn from others’ experience of war:

In Spain at the present time, bombing and anti-aircraft gunfire [are] being employed under active service conditions. It [is] impossible for us to reproduce such conditions in this country in time of peace. For instance, the ‘Queen Bee’ targets at present in use only [fly] at about 80 knots, whereas in actual war we should have to face aircraft flying at anything up to 300 knots.<sup>88</sup>

An example of the evolution of German weaponry in Spain is the AA (Flak) gun, which was also used in the role of AT gun. The German Flak guns, as Deighton notes, ‘unlike Allied guns, were supplied with armour-piercing (solid shot) as well as high-explosive shells, [yet German] designers had managed to keep the guns’ structural strength while making them light in weight [and therefore easier to move]’.<sup>89</sup> These details were known by British intelligence, as the JIC(S) report ‘Anti-Aircraft (Artillery) Defence’ demonstrated. It asserted that ‘explosive bullets are effective in air combat and may be expected to be effective from light A.A. guns when sensitively fused’.<sup>90</sup> However, what British intelligence undervalued was the importance of the Spanish civil war in developing the techniques and equipment of the German forces. Had this intelligence been properly used, it could for example have impeded the German 88 mm gun from penetrating heavy British tank armour.<sup>91</sup>

The Allied armies paid dear for having misread the consequences of warfare in Spain. As Air Marshal Sir Victor Goddard remembered, after Dunkirk:

everything was in the melting pot. The Army, disillusioned by air co-operation, was crying out to have its own air force; some highly placed figures were even demanding Spitfires for reconnaissance;

<sup>87</sup> Wark, ‘British Intelligence’, p. 82.

<sup>88</sup> PRO, CAB 56/1, 18th JIC, ‘Intelligence regarding Air Warfare’, 8 July 1938.

<sup>89</sup> L. Deighton, *Blitzkrieg: From the Rise of Hitler to the Fall of Dunkirk* (London, 1979), p. 192.

<sup>90</sup> PRO, CAB 56/3, JIC Paper No. 40, ‘Spain: Intelligence Regarding Air Warfare, Report No. 1: Anti-Aircraft (Artillery) Defence’, 6 October 1937.

<sup>91</sup> Deighton, *Blitzkrieg*, p. 281.

others were asking for the control of our entire array of air power so soon as the invasion came, if not before.<sup>92</sup>

Although the short-sightedness of British intelligence was not the only reason for the German successes of May–June 1940, it should be stressed that had the Allied forces prepared and equipped themselves as the Spanish civil war could have taught them to do, it is possible that their defeat in May 1940 might not have been so quick and so complete.

There can be no doubt that Britain's government and military establishment had at its disposal the means to know enough about how the German armed forces were likely to operate in the battlefield at least to be ready to counter some aspects of German doctrine. Over three years the Spanish civil war provided strong evidence of the sophistication which Franco's German forces reached. This was clearly indicated in Winterbottom's report from early February 1937, at a time when the country had been at war for less than seven months. The disappearance of this document seems inconceivable, particularly as the JIC(S) and the higher ministries were desperate for this kind of intelligence.

The prejudices that stopped those in charge of collecting and analysing intelligence from accepting the lessons from the warfare witnessed in Spain were perhaps the first stone in the road to Dunkirk. These lessons seemed to be extremely clear to the head of the JIC(S) when he wrote that 'the [Spanish civil war], indeed, had been invaluable to the Axis countries in many ways as a practice camp and training school for the development of new techniques in warfare. One of those new techniques was dive-bombing.'<sup>93</sup> It is a pity that Air Marshal Sir Victor Goddard wrote this in 1957 instead of February 1938, when he seemed more concerned about how the effect of an air raid was less depressing in sunny Spain.

<sup>92</sup> LHCMA, V. Goddard, 'Epic Violet', 1957, p. 149.

<sup>93</sup> Op. cit.