



# FRANCO AND THE CONDOR LEGION

THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR IN THE AIR

MICHAEL ALPERT

BLOOMSBURY

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the town of Valencia, Spain, during the Spanish Civil War, c.1938–39.

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# Preface

On 22 May 1939, several thousand German *Luftwaffe* (air force) personnel paraded on the aerodrome of the northern Spanish city of León in the presence of General Francisco Franco, the victor in the civil war which had come to an end a few weeks earlier on 1 April. The parliamentary and democratic Spanish Republic had been bloodily defeated, to be replaced by a repressive dictatorship which would last until Franco's death in November 1975.

Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany had aided Franco's cause by providing him with an expeditionary air force called the Condor Legion. At the parade, as the military bands crashed out German and Spanish marches, Franco, accompanied by the most important Insurgent, or Nationalist, as they preferred to be called,<sup>1</sup> commanders, together with the ambassadors of Germany and of Fascist Italy, which had also sent massive aid to Franco, gave warm speeches of appreciation and farewell. The last commander of the Condor Legion, General Wolfram Freiherr (Baron) von Richthofen, a cousin of the famous air ace of the First World War, speaking in Spanish, replied referring to the 'shared shedding of blood, which has deepened and eternalised German – Spanish friendship', as he presented a collection of one million pesetas for the families of Spanish pilots who had lost their lives on Franco's side.<sup>2</sup> From León the 5,136 Germans still in Spain of the 19,000 who had at some time served there, drove the 250 miles to the port of Vigo, where they marched proudly through the city to the cheers of the spectators and drank one last glass of Spanish wine before embarking in ships of the official Nazi leisure and tourism organization, known as *Kraft durch Freude* ('Strength through Joy'). Setting sail for Germany on 25 May, they took with them the most modern of the aircraft that had helped to win victory for Franco: Messerschmitt Bf-109E fighters, Heinkel-111 bombers and Junkers-87 dive-bombers, though most out-of-date equipment was left and would equip the Spanish air force for many years to come.

They arrived to a heroes' welcome in Hamburg and were taken to the major base of Döberitz, where they had first been mustered in July 1936, before reassembling for a final triumphant parade in Berlin on 6 June 1939 in which fourteen thousand men of the Condor Legion took part. Then they returned to the *Luftwaffe* and the other units from which they had been selected to help

Franco save Spain from the 'Bolshevism' which propaganda had alleged was about to overwhelm traditional and Catholic Spain, whose older values were now to be restored by Franco and his heroic 'Glorious National Movement'.

The Spanish Civil War was fought on land and at sea but also in an age of great interest in air warfare and the very rapid development of warplanes. In the latter 1930s, one-gun, wooden and fabric biplanes, not too different from those of the First World War, gave way to the monoplane, all-metal, heavily armed British Spitfire and Hurricane, and the German Messerschmitt Bf-109, which would fight the battle of Britain in 1940. Biplanes might be very manoeuvrable, but the monoplane had the advantage of superior speed and wings strong enough to hold more and heavier guns than the biplane as well as to withstand the much higher speeds provided by more powerful engines. The Spanish war began with the biplanes of the late 1920s with which the Spanish *Aviación de Guerra* or air force was equipped and ended after two years and eight months with state-of-the-art machines supplied and flown by German and Italian pilots in the service of Franco's Nationalists, as well as Soviet machines and Russian pilots who had been sent to Spain to save the Republic from impending defeat. Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union or USSR sent the two warring Spanish sides Heinkel, Junker, Dornier, Messerschmitt, Savoia-Marchetti, Fiat, Polikarpov and Tupolev warplanes. These were the most advanced bombers and fighters of their time, whose makes would become familiar during the Second World War. In Spain, they were to be tried out in what is often referred to as a rehearsal for a major European war. The participating German, Italian and Soviet air forces studied the experiences of pilots and the performance of the various machines, while they tried to draw lessons from Spain which they could apply in a future conflict. The vital questions which the Great Powers had to face in the latter 1930s were the following: how far was the British Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, right when he declared to the House of Commons in 1932 that 'the bomber will always get through'?<sup>3</sup> Should countries rely on large bomber forces to destroy their enemies, as in the 1936 film *Things to Come*, or should better-armed, more manoeuvrable and faster fighter aircraft be developed? Could the Spanish Civil War provide reliable answers?

## Europe in 1936

By 1936 when the Spanish Civil War broke out, Britain and France, the European victors of the 1914–18 war, were having to deal with problems created by the accession to power in Germany of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis.<sup>4</sup> Hitler had become Chancellor in January 1933. He had rejected the terms of the Versailles Treaty of 1919 which had ended the First World War. He had recreated the banned German general staff and the air force, now called the *Luftwaffe*. In June 1935, by

the Anglo-German Naval Treaty, Britain had recognized the right of Germany to create a sizeable navy. In March 1936, France and Britain had silently consented to German troops marching into the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland.

As for Fascist Italy, in 1935–6, Britain and France had had to accept the conquest and establishment by the dictator Mussolini of a colonial regime in Abyssinia. As the Spanish Civil War was beginning, in July 1936, the last sanctions which had been imposed on Italy for its aggression by the League of Nations were being lifted. Italy and Germany were spending vast amounts of money on armaments while British and French diplomatic efforts were directed to avoiding, at almost all costs, another major European war.

The USSR, for its part, was just emerging from being treated as an international pariah after the Russian revolution had confiscated all private property and murdered the Russian royal family. The West deeply and widely feared communist subversion, while Hitler's rhetoric was consistently anti-Soviet and threatening. Consequently, in August 1935, Moscow had announced a new policy. It would back-pedal its aim of world revolution and would henceforth instruct communist parties to cooperate in 'Popular Fronts', that is, electoral alliances with all forces, even conservatives, provided that they recognized the danger posed by Nazis and Fascists, whose powerful movements were threatening to overthrow liberal and parliamentary regimes. In France, where such extremist movements were menacingly strong, the Popular Front alliance had won the elections of June 1936. When the Spanish Civil War broke out in July, France was governed by the socialist Léon Blum, but in the previous year Britain had elected an overwhelming Conservative Party majority under Stanley Baldwin. Blum's position on Spain would be weakened by the French insistence on not diverging from British policy. While Blum would want to support the Spanish Republic, Baldwin would strive to keep Britain completely neutral.

As for Spain, it was a backward country, which had been neutral in the First World War. It counted for little in European politics. Spanish experience of war had been limited to its slow suppression or 'pacification' of rebellious tribes in the zone of the Moroccan Protectorate which had been allocated to Spain by the 1912 Treaty of Fez. While the Spanish air force had played an important role in bringing supplies to remote desert posts and had carried out massive air bombing against villages, souks, water supplies and cattle, especially with mustard gas, and had developed techniques of firing, aiming and bombing over at least six years,<sup>5</sup> it had never had to fight an enemy in the air and had not developed modern air war techniques.

Political, economic and social advance in Spain had been slow. However, the country had undergone a peaceful revolution when the king, Alfonso XIII, abdicated on 14 April 1931 in favour of a Republic with progressive ideals. Since then, extensive reforms had been implemented, though not very successfully, in landownership, the separation of Church and State and the role and structure of

the army. However, conservative and traditional hostility to progressive change had been great, and this had led to two years, between November 1933 and February 1936, of reaction and standstill in the reforms. In February 1936, a modified Popular Front had won a narrow electoral victory over a conservative opinion alarmed at the apparent strength of the three great Spanish working-class organizations, the anarcho-syndicalist *CNT* or *Confederación Nacional de Trabajo* (National Labour Federation), the socialist *UGT* or *Unión General de Trabajadores* (General Workers' Union) and its political party, the *PSOE* or *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party), all of which seemed, to conservative opinion, to be planning revolution with the aid of progressive political parties.

In Spain the army, in which air force officers had begun their careers, had traditionally engineered coups to overthrow civilian governments. The Republic of 1931 had been preceded by the dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera. In 1932 army officers had attempted a coup, while since the victory of the Popular Front in February 1936 officers in garrisons all over Spain had been planning to declare martial law, overthrow the government and replace it either with an authoritarian Republican regime or bring back the monarchy. A few officers were members or sympathizers of the small but violent Fascist *Falange* party.

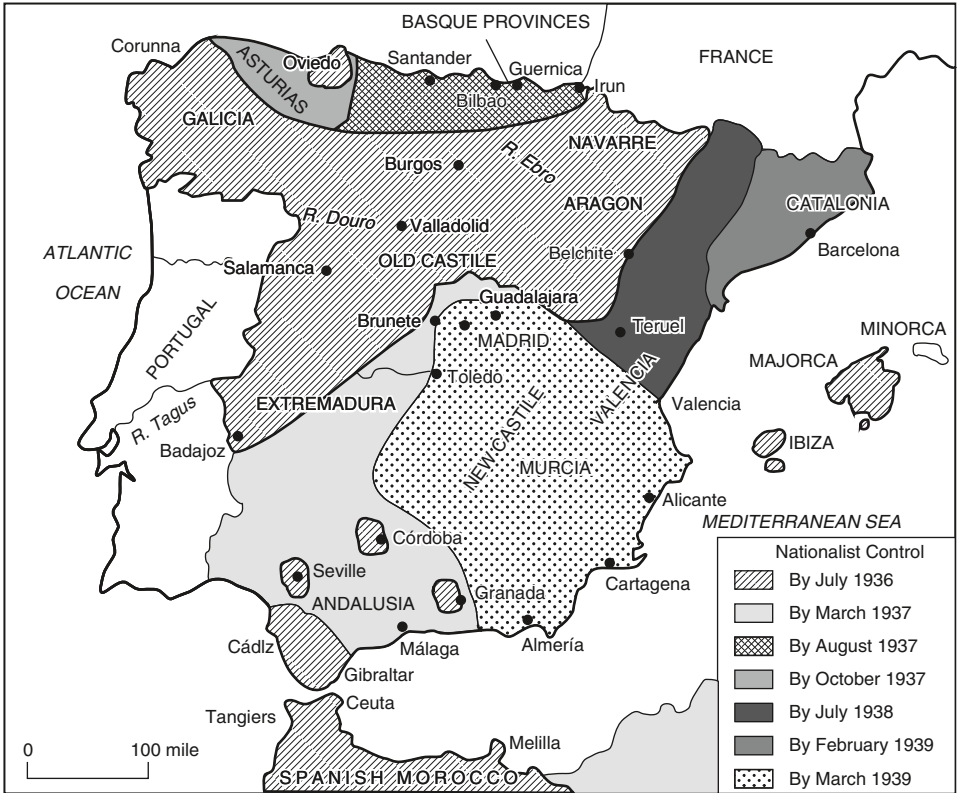
The army uprising which led to the Spanish Civil War began on the afternoon of Friday, 17 July 1936, in Tetuán, capital of the Spanish zone of the Protectorate of Morocco, and was successful there within thirty-six hours, crushing all resistance. On Saturday, 18 July, Franco, who was the general in command in the Canary Islands, proclaimed martial law as a preliminary to the 'Glorious National Revolution' and called by radio on all Spanish garrisons to come out in rebellion. Many did so. In Barcelona, however, the insurgents were defeated on Sunday, 19 July. They were crushed in Madrid on Monday, 20 July, as well as in many other towns and cities in central, southern and eastern Spain, in Catalonia, in the Basque Country and a fringe along Spain's northern coast from the French frontier through the Basque Country and the provinces of Santander and Asturias, as far as Oviedo. However, the insurrectionary garrisons were successful in large parts of western and northern Spain and in large and smaller cities, including Zaragoza, Seville, Córdoba and Granada, and they were able to take southern ports such as Cádiz and Algeciras. Thus the success of the uprising in some parts of the country, in contrast with the failure to rebel or of rebellions of some garrisons in other parts, often led by officers loyal to the Republic, plus the fierce resistance in the larger cities of political parties of the left and centre, together with workers' groups, meant that Spain was to be faced by a civil war.<sup>6</sup>

The only general works available on the Spanish Civil War in the air are General Jesús Salas Larrazábal's *La guerra de España desde el aire* (Esplugues

de Llobregat, 1969) and his enormous *Guerra Aérea 36/9* (Madrid, 1998). The former deals almost entirely with fighter operations and, though it has appeared in English,<sup>7</sup> it is often unmanageable because of its breathless accumulation of detail, which is also characteristic of Salas's later book. The latter is nevertheless valuable because of its extreme detail. In English, Gerald Howson's *Aircraft of the Spanish Civil War* (Putnam, 1990) is basically a thorough list of aircraft and their operations but not organized chronologically. The present book, while laying emphasis on the German contribution to Franco's victory, describes and analyses in chronological order and depth the intervention of German, Italian and Soviet aircraft in the Spanish conflict, as well as the supply of aircraft in general and the role of a number of volunteer and mercenary airmen, while trying to explain the result of the war, its importance for the Second World War and the possible lessons learnt.



Map of Spain with places mentioned in the text



Franco takes control of Spain, 1936–9



# Chapter 1

## The Spanish Civil War

### begins: A disaster which brought Franco to power

Some individual flights, fortunate or disastrous, which took place at the very outset of the Spanish Civil War, made a substantial difference to the outcome. They facilitated the meteoric rise of General Francisco Franco, who had been a lesser figure in the planning of the insurrection which led to the war, and led to his eventual dictatorship which lasted till his death in November 1975, over forty years after he declared military rebellion on 18 July 1936.

General José Sanjurjo, known as the 'Lion of the Riff' for his military triumphs during the pacification of the Spanish zone of Morocco in the 1920s, was to be the leader of the uprising planned for July 1936. In August 1932 he had led a coup against the reforming Spanish Republic, which had been established on 14 April 1931 after King Alfonso XIII had abandoned the throne. Sanjurjo was a leading figure in the army, both among those who sought a restoration of Alfonso XIII and for the Carlists or Traditionalists. The latter supported the claims of a pretender in a dynastic squabble going back to the nineteenth century. In 1936, they still constituted a major force which would be of great military aid to the uprising of July 1936 and the subsequent civil war.

Unsupported by most of his fellow officers, Sanjurjo's 1932 coup failed. Fleeing towards Portugal, the general surrendered on the frontier. He stood trial and was condemned to death for military rebellion, but President Manuel Azaña, perhaps mindful of the executions of army officers who had mounted an abortive Republican coup in 1930 and had achieved the status of martyrs, commuted Sanjurjo's sentence to life imprisonment. However, having been dismissed from the army, the distinguished general would have to serve his sentence in a convict gaol rather than in the less shameful conditions of a military prison reserved for officers. He had to wear prison overalls and live among robbers and murderers,

which surrounded him with a halo of martyrdom in the eyes of many. The victory of right-wing parties in the elections of November 1933 was followed by amnesty for Sanjurjo the following April, after which the general went into exile in the conservative and undemocratic *Estado Novo* of Portugal presided over by António d'Oliveira Salazar.

At Spanish elections on 18 February 1936, a victorious alliance of centre and left parties, in a weak imitation of the Popular Front which would triumph in France in May and June 1936, induced several groups, among them officers, the young Fascist-like Falange movement and a spectrum of conservatives and monarchists, to begin serious planning for the insurrection which many of them had been considering ever since the Republic had been established in 1931. The murder in Madrid, during the torrid night of 12–13 July 1936, of the leader of the right-wing National Front, José Calvo Sotelo, carried out by left-wing members of the armed police, in revenge for the assassination of left-wing officers who had been advising working-class groups how to defend themselves against the feared army uprising, acted as the touchpaper to the declaration of military law by army garrisons over most of Spain.

The plan was for General Sanjurjo to be flown from his exile in Portugal to the headquarters of the Burgos army division, in the right-wing area of northern Castile. From there, as a unifying figurehead, he would lead the military uprising which aimed to march on Madrid, overthrow the Popular Front government of the Republic and replace it with an authoritarian right-wing regime.

From his command at Pamplona, capital of Navarre, General Emilio Mola, the planner of the details of the uprising, sent a De Havilland Puss Moth biplane, one of three single-passenger light sports and touring aircraft recently acquired by Spanish purchasers, to Lisbon on Sunday, 19 July 1936. The ardent royalist and experienced aviator Major Juan Antonio Ansaldo was to fly Sanjurjo from his Portuguese exile to Burgos where, since the little Puss Moth had no radio, white sheets, spread out on the ground of the aerodrome, would indicate that the garrison had successfully imposed martial law.

The Portuguese government, wary of complaints from neighbouring Spain that Ansaldo was planning to take off with the distrusted and exiled general from a military aerodrome, instructed him to pick Sanjurjo up from a smaller landing strip, in fact a racecourse, at Marinha, on the south coast of Portugal, so that Lisbon could state officially that it was unaware of the general's departure for Spain. This was to have disastrous consequences for Sanjurjo, but it would be a step in bringing Franco nearer to power.

On the following day, Monday, 20 July 1936, the direction of the wind at Marinha obliged Ansaldo to take off in the direction of a grove of pine trees. General Sanjurjo insisted on loading the Puss Moth with a trunk containing the ceremonial uniform which he looked forward to wearing when he was announced as the Saviour of Spain. 'I need to wear proper clothes as the new *caudillo*

of Spain', he claimed, or so Ansaldo recounted in his memoirs.<sup>1</sup> Later, Franco would use this medieval Spanish title, corresponding to the Italian *Duce*, the German *Fuehrer* and, far away in England, the absurd-sounding 'Leader', a title by which the head of the British Fascist movement, Oswald Mosley, was known. It was precisely the weight of Sanjurjo's baggage which was thought at the time to have been the cause of the disaster which killed him, though it did not prevent the Puss Moth from taking off.

Ansaldo, nervous but at the same time recalling how many risky take-offs he had carried out successfully, taxied to the far edge of the field, turned, revved his motors to their maximum and surged forward over what he recalled later as bumpy ground. At a speed of 10 mph faster than normal, to ensure he could clear the trees, he felt a heavy knock. He took off, but the aircraft was vibrating intensely. Ansaldo thought he had damaged his propeller. Urgently seeking a place to land before the propeller shattered, he was unable to clear a stone wall. The fully fuelled aircraft burst into flames. Ansaldo, his flying kit on fire, managed to open the door and throw himself out, while the general, his skull fractured and perhaps already dead, was swallowed up in the conflagration. Later, there would be unfounded rumours that the ambitious Franco had arranged for the Puss Moth to be sabotaged. This is unlikely, because Franco, though admittedly wily, was quite junior among the leaders of the uprising and not even in the running to become, as he later would, generalissimo, head of the Nationalist government and Head of State.

## **A successful flight for Franco**

Generals of division, equivalent to British major generals, held the highest rank in the Spanish army, but Francisco Franco was almost the most junior of them. He was military commander of the Canary Islands where he was thought by the Spanish government to be far enough away from the mainland not to be involved in military coups, despite the suspicion in which his monarchist background was held. His planned role in the uprising was to lead a military insurrection in the Spanish zone of northern Morocco, where he had served with distinction during the Riff wars of the 1920s and reached the rank of brigadier general at the very early age of 34. He was immensely influential in the officer corps, having been director of the General Military Academy and chief of staff during the military suppression of a violent left-wing uprising in the mining districts of Asturias in October 1934.<sup>2</sup> Thus it was vital to bring him from his headquarters in the Canaries to Tetuán, capital of Spanish Morocco, where he would take command of the Moorish professional troops, known as the *Regulares*, and the Legion, a disciplined, well-trained and brutal colonial-type force created on the model of the French Foreign Legion but mostly Spanish in composition.

To bring Franco undetected from the Canary Islands to Morocco demanded speed and concealment. The journey required an aircraft which could cover the 850-mile distance quickly and with the minimum of refuelling stops. No such private machine was available to the conspirators in Spain, so arrangements were made to charter a multi-seat state-of-the art passenger aircraft. This was a De Havilland Dragon Rapide DH-89A belonging to Olley Air Service at Croydon Airport, south of London. This aircraft, one of the most successful piston-engined machines ever built, could accommodate six to eight passengers depending on the fuel load. It had a range of 578 miles and could thus reach Tetuán from the Canaries with only one or two stops.

The plane was chartered by Luis Bolín, London correspondent of the Spanish monarchist newspaper *ABC*. The money for the charter was provided by the multimillionaire Juan March through a London bank. Leaving Croydon at 7.15 am on Saturday, 11 July 1936, the Dragon Rapide was piloted by Captain Cecil Bebb, who later claimed (in a 1983 Granada Television documentary) that he had thought that his plane was going to liberate a Riff chieftain from exile in the Canaries and fly him back to Morocco. This is an extraordinary indication of the attitude of pilots such as Captain Olley, director of Olley Air Service, and Bebb, who did not seem to be aware that they might have caused a serious international incident through interfering in the internal affairs of another country. The flight simulated a tourist jaunt to the Canaries and carried, beside the pilot, radio operator and flight engineer, two attractive young women as cover in case the Spanish government's spies were watching their fellow passenger Bolín, who had published a book in Britain three years earlier attacking the Spanish Republic.<sup>3</sup> The most intriguing of the travellers, however, was the father of one of the young women. This was Major Hugh Pollard, who had been in War Office Intelligence and had experience of the Troubles in Ireland and revolutions in Mexico. He was suggested by Douglas Jerrold, who had served in British Intelligence and was now a right-wing publisher and a fellow author of the book written by Bolín attacking the Spanish Republic.<sup>4</sup> Pollard's presence on the flight suggests that MI6 or some similar organization may have had knowledge of the mission to bring Franco to Morocco.

The flight was carefully prepared. After stops at Bordeaux, Biarritz, Oporto, Lisbon, Casablanca and in the Spanish Sahara, the Dragon Rapide reached Gando aerodrome on Grand Canary on 14 July. Franco made arrangements to leave his headquarters on Tenerife and travel to Grand Canary to attend the funeral of the local commander, General Balmes, who had accidentally shot himself while cleaning his revolver. Some historians suspect that Balmes was conveniently killed to give Franco an excuse to apply to Madrid for permission to leave his post and go to Grand Canary on the overnight boat for the funeral, arriving early on Friday, 17 July.<sup>5</sup>

The rising in Morocco was scheduled to begin the following day. At 5 am on Saturday, 18 July, Franco signed the declaration of martial law and set off for Gando airfield, whence Bebb took off with his passenger at 2 pm to fly to Morocco. After landing at Agadir to refuel, they flew on to Casablanca, where they spent the night. Bebb took off next morning for Tetuán. Franco instructed Bebb to circle low over Sania Ramel military aerodrome; he recognized officers whom he knew, thus being reassured that the uprising had been a success. Having deposited his passenger, Bebb flew the Dragon Rapide on to Lisbon where Bolín conferred with General Sanjurjo before the latter's fatal air crash on Monday, 20 July. From there they went to Marseilles. The Dragon Rapide returned to Croydon while Bolín continued to Rome where he had been instructed to ask the Italian government for support for the Spanish military insurrection.

This British aircraft, registered G-ACVR, had played an irreplaceable role in assuring Franco's rise to power. It continued flying until 1953. In the 1960s it was restored, presented to the Spanish government and placed on display at the Museo del Aire.<sup>6</sup> Cecil Bebb, who had begun his flying career in 1921 as a 16-year-old Royal Air Force apprentice and had become a sergeant pilot, went on to become operations manager for British United Airways and to enjoy a distinguished career in British aviation.

## **Two Spanish generals fly to their deaths before the firing squad**

General Manuel Goded, Inspector General of the Spanish army and highly respected for his intellectual qualities, was linked with the reactionary army officers' league, the *Unión Militar Española*. His task in the planned insurrection was to fly from Majorca, where he was commanding officer, to Barcelona, arriving at about midday on Sunday, 19 July, in order to take over the leadership of the uprising among the numerous regiments in barracks in the city. Summoned by Goded, five Spanish air force Savoia-Marchetti S-62 seaplanes arrived in Majorca that morning from their base on Minorca. One of the pilots, realizing that he was taking part in an insurrection, flew back to Minorca, which would remain in Republican hands for the rest of the war. At about midday, the remaining four machines with Goded, two officers and Goded's son aboard, swept in over the seaplane base of the great city of Barcelona. They were alarmed not to see the white cross which was to indicate that the insurrection had succeeded. The Catalan regional government, the *Generalitat*, was still in charge despite the army regiments having come out into the streets. Goded had a hard task before him. He signed to his pilot to go down, but even as he was being driven from the seaplane base to military headquarters he was fired on. As the hot July afternoon wore on, it became clear that none of the objectives of the insurgents had been

reached. The military uprising had failed because of the concerted action of the organized Barcelona working class and their immense anarcho-syndicalist union, the *Confederación Nacional de Trabajo* or CNT, together with the loyalty of the militarized police force, the *Guardia Civil*, and the air base at El Prat, today Barcelona's civil airport. As night began to fall, General Goded broadcast his surrender to his supporters: 'Luck has been against me [. . .] if you want to avoid more bloodletting, I free you from your oath of loyalty.'<sup>7</sup> He would be tried within a few days by court martial and executed for military rebellion.

General Miguel Núñez de Prado, commander of the air force, also lost his life before a firing squad for the crime of military rebellion, but in his case it was at the hands of the insurgents. The military uprising of 18 July 1936 consisted of the declaration by garrisons all over Spain of the state of war, which put the area concerned under military law. This was against the constitution because only the civil authorities could institute the state of war. However, the army saw itself as bound by the articles of the *Ley Constitutiva del Ejército* or Constitutional Army Act of 29 November 1878, whose Article 2 required the army to defend Spain not only from exterior enemies but from internal ones also. The justification for the unilateral declaration of the state of war, which gave all power to the military, was that the government was no longer able or willing to fulfil its obligations to maintain law and order. This was the official view throughout the Franco years.<sup>8</sup>

Núñez de Prado had been highly decorated and swiftly promoted for valour in the wars of the 1920s in the Spanish zone of Morocco. Already an army colonel, he graduated as pilot and observer in 1923–4. Now a general of division, the highest possible rank under the Second Republic, Núñez de Prado was appointed head of the air force and civil aviation (*Director General de Aeronáutica*) on 12 January 1936. As such, he tried to ensure that officers loyal to the Republic were placed in sensitive posts. When the military insurrection began on the evening of Friday, 17 July 1936, Núñez de Prado assured himself first of the loyalty of the officers commanding the airfields of Barajas, Cuatro Vientos and Getafe, all close to Madrid. Then he was ordered to fly to Morocco and quash the rebellion there, but news came that the airfield at Tetuán was already taken by the insurgents. Another mission was, therefore, selected for him. He was to fly north-east to Zaragoza to persuade the commanding general there, Miguel Cabanellas, who was a known Republican and a Freemason, which in Spain indicated a person of progressive sympathies, not to join the insurrection. At Getafe, to the south of Madrid, accompanied by his military secretary, his aide-de-camp, the pilot and a mechanic, he boarded one of the De Havilland DH-89s of the Spanish LAPE (*Líneas Aéreas Postales españolas*) postal service. Landing at Zaragoza at about 3 pm, he was driven to military headquarters in the city to interview Cabanellas, an ex-comrade in arms in Morocco. Núñez de Prado had bravely ventured into the wolf's lair. He soon realized that the senior officers were hostile and that Cabanellas, with his white beard which made him look years older than his true

age, was merely a figurehead. The fate of General Miguel Núñez de Prado has always been a mystery, but he was transferred to prison in Pamplona, possibly 'released' into the hands of extremists and probably assassinated.<sup>9</sup>

## **Franco's last potential rival dies in an air crash**

Brigadier General Emilio Mola Vidal, stationed at Pamplona and 'director' and brains of the insurrection of 18 July 1936, was the only remaining possible rival of Franco, who became generalissimo and Head of State at the end of September 1936. In the following spring, Mola was successfully commanding the assault on the Basque Country and its capital, Bilbao, after several attacks by Franco on Madrid had failed. On 3 June 1937, Mola was flying from Vitoria to Burgos in one of three British-built Airspeed Envoy low-winged monoplane transport aircraft, acquired before the war. A defector had flown it in 1936 from Madrid to Pamplona.<sup>10</sup> The plane in which Mola was flying crashed into a hillside. Rumours that it had been sabotaged in Franco's interest circulated for years.

Thus, General Sanjurjo, the leader of the uprising, and two potential rivals to Franco, Generals Goded and Mola, were killed during or immediately after flights, while Franco himself was flown successfully to take command of the one part of the Spanish army which was efficient, well-trained and ruthlessly led.

## **The Spanish air force at the start of the civil war**

In the Spanish armed forces, the navy was traditionally the most conservative. In July 1936, uprisings by the navy officers had been planned for the two major Spanish naval bases. The insurgent officers had been successful at El Ferrol on the north coast but had failed in Cartagena in the extreme south-east of Spain. Naval officers had agreed not to hinder the transfer of troops by the Francoists from Morocco to the Peninsula. Since that was precisely what they were ordered to do by the Navy Minister and later briefly Prime Minister, José Giral, who had ordered the fleet to leave El Ferrol and Cartagena and blockade the coast of Morocco, the ships' officers were in fact in a state of mutiny.<sup>11</sup>

Many captains, majors and lieutenant colonels in the various garrisons, which were widely spread all over the Peninsula as well as the Balearic and Canary Islands and in the Moroccan protectorate, arrested their own superiors and made the difference between their units remaining loyal to the Republic and declaring against it. At the same time, in the air force, events in the various air bases and airfields also depended largely on the pilots and other personnel.

While military aviation had begun very early in Spain, having been employed in 1913 to drop bombs by hand on unruly Moroccan tribesmen, the Spanish air force had never fought in a European war. The civil war of 1936–9 was thus the first conflict in which Spanish airmen duelled with aircraft flown by other Spaniards, as well as by Germans, Italians and Russians. Nevertheless, Spanish flyers had an admired place among the pioneers of long-distance flights. The 'Plus Ultra', a Dornier Wal flying boat, carried out the first of these long Spanish flights. Leaving Palos de la Frontera on Spain's southern coast on 22 January 1926, its crew, led by Major Ramón Franco, younger brother of the future general and Spanish dictator, touched down at Buenos Aires on 10 February, having flown 6,420 miles in just under sixty hours at an average speed of 106 mph. Soon after, Eduardo González Gallarza, who would end his career as Air Minister in Franco's government, led three Bréguet XIX biplanes in a flight from Madrid to Manila, capital of the Philippines, beginning on 5 April 1926. He and two others covered the distance in thirty-nine days. Later flights pioneered the route from Spain to Fernando Poo, a Spanish possession in the Gulf of Guinea, while two Spanish pilots flew non-stop to Brazil.

The officers of the Spanish air force were largely indifferent to politics, but nevertheless there was somewhat of a progressive tradition among a minority of airmen, who saw themselves as very modern. This became evident at the end of the dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera in January 1929 and during the indecisive two years which ended with the declaration of the Second Republic on 14 April 1931. Most air force officers were no more than vaguely liberal; a few were clearly right wing, but a handful, stationed mostly at Cuatro Vientos base, south of Madrid, cherished advanced political ideas but had little ability to influence most of their comrades and, despite going on to occupy high office briefly in the Republican government of 1931, failed to affect politics in general.<sup>12</sup>

Among military officers who schemed to overthrow the government of General Berenguer, which followed the downfall of Primo de Rivera, were a number of senior air force officers, most of whom would serve in the Republican air force during the civil war, among them General Miguel Núñez de Prado, who was executed by the insurgents, Lieutenant Colonel Luis Riaño and Majors Ramón Franco (who, unlike the others, would join his brother in rising against the Republic), Angel Pastor, Ignacio Hidalgo de Cisneros, Antonio Camacho and Felipe Díaz Sandino. Their insurrection on 15 December 1930 consisted of taking off from Cuatro Vientos airfield to throw leaflets over the capital. Ramón Franco desisted from his plan to drop bombs on the Royal Palace because the square in front of it was crowded with civilians and children at play. The revolutionary officers returned to Cuatro Vientos and boarded another aircraft in which they fled to seek asylum in Portugal, whence they went to Brussels and later to Paris to join the survivors of the badly planned and uncoordinated Republican insurrection. Later, they waited in the French capital with other anti-monarchist officers and politicians

for the Spanish regime to fall and, as they hoped, be followed by the abdication of Alfonso XIII and the declaration of a Republic. When the Republic was declared on 14 April 1931, the revolutionary officers returned to be welcomed by enthusiastic crowds at Madrid's North Station.

Although the air force had expanded significantly during the Riff wars of the 1920s, Spain's parlous economic state had not permitted much advance since then. As Manuel Azaña, Minister for War and Prime Minister of the Spanish Republic between 1931 and 1933 stated on 10 March 1932 during the debate on the budget:

Without military aviation we are defenceless, because the other nations with whom Spain might go to war have powerful air forces [. . .] Spain is little better than in the cradle in comparison.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, in an epoch when few countries had established an air force independent of the army, Azaña created the Air Corps or *Cuerpo de Aviación*. On 5 April 1933, he established, directly under the Prime Minister's office, the overarching *Dirección General de Aeronáutica*, which included military, naval and civil aviation, probably with the aim of centralizing the air question and removing it from the dead or hostile hands of other ministries, for the Spanish military, like officers in many other armies, tended to be antagonistic to the idea of an independent air force, and to see aircraft as no more than adjuncts to the role of the land army.

However, such changes were visionary and as yet without practical force. For all the modern attitude towards military flying that the Republic seemed to have brought with it, Spain was a poor country. 1931–3, the first two years of the Republic, saw no plan to acquire modern aircraft, and there were many other aspects of Spain's defence which were seen as needing more urgent attention. Although a major programme of rearmament, including orders for 249 new aircraft, was initiated in 1934–5, by the outbreak of the civil war on 18 July 1936, hardly any new material had arrived in Spain. Thus, when the garrisons declared the state of war in 1936, the Spanish air force was, to say the least, poorly equipped. In the first few weeks of the war, the air force on both sides, with a total of 203 functioning warplanes, was to be stretched beyond all its powers in a very large number of missions under the most adverse conditions.

## Aircraft

In 1936, the standard bomber and reconnaissance aircraft in the Spanish air force was the two-seater Bréguet XIX sesquiplane (the upper wing was half as long again as the lower), a French model of 1921 built under licence in Spain,

though by 1934 the French air force had already withdrawn it from service. It could carry up to 400 kg of bombs, 6 of 11 kg beneath each of its lower wings, and 48 light missiles launched through a bomb chute on the floor in the middle of the fuselage. For defence, the observer/bomb aimer had two 7.7mm Vickers machine guns mounted on a ring. Two hundred Bréguets were built in Spain between 1926 and 1933. They equipped five bomber wings<sup>14</sup> of the air force. There were two squadrons of nine aircraft each at Getafe, to the south of Madrid; three squadrons at León; and a further three at Logroño, covering northern Spain. There was another wing of two squadrons at Tablada, near Seville, the largest airfield in southern Spain, and a further wing at El Atalayón, the airfield at Melilla on Morocco's Mediterranean coast, and there were flights composed of three machines each stationed at Larache and Cape Yubi, on the Atlantic coast of Spanish Sahara. Bréguets were also used for liaison services and for gunnery and bombing schools and could be used to make up the numbers in squadrons when machines were under repair. Perhaps in total there were about 120 Bréguet XIXs in service in Spain, of which about half were captured by the insurgents. The Spanish version was not equipped with front-firing guns, so the observer gunner could bring his machine gun to bear only if his pilot flew in front or sideways on to the attacking machine. Its maximum speed on the level was 100 mph.<sup>15</sup>

Spain's standard fighter plane was the Hispano-Nieuport-52, a French design built under licence in Spain between 1929 and 1931. It had two front-firing 7.92 mm Vickers machine guns synchronized to fire between the propeller blades. Spanish pilots found it heavy on the controls and liable to ground loop on landing. Its maximum speed was about 140 mph. About fifty-six were in service when the civil war began in July 1936 and a number of these were under repair, including seven which the insurgents captured.

In June 1936, three Hawker Fury fighters, bought from Britain, arriving in crates, were assembled and tested. Spain's aviation authority, the *Dirección General de Aeronáutica*, had contracted to build fifty Fury fighters. They had a stated maximum speed of 187 mph. The international agreement not to intervene in the civil war reached by European countries in August 1936 prevented the contract being carried out. Had it been completed, Spain would have begun the conflict with what was at the time considered one of the best fighters in the world, which entered the Royal Air Force and served until it was superseded by the Hawker Hurricane and the Supermarine Spitfire in time for the battle of Britain.

Four Fokker F.VIIb bomber versions of a widely flown commercial aircraft of the early 1930s had been built in Spain and delivered to the Spanish air base at Cape Yubi in the Western Sahara. Five passenger versions of this machine were used by the Spanish commercial airline Líneas Aéreas Postales Españolas, referred to as LAPE, which also possessed four Douglas DC2 airliners.

As for naval aircraft, these were based at San Javier on the coast in the Mar Menor, a salty lagoon in the extreme south-east of Spain, between Murcia and the great naval base of Cartagena. Seven miles to the south was the major air base of Los Alcázares. At San Javier there were three CASA-Vickers Vildebeest squadrons, which were however as yet not equipped with their torpedoes. They could carry a very heavy load of three quarters of a ton of bombs but were extremely slow. There were also twenty-six Dornier-Wal flying boats, but only eight or nine were airworthy. This was a design of 1922, built in Spain under licence in 1929. With a range of 625 miles, they could play a successful role as long-distance reconnaissance and ship-bombing aircraft. There were thirty-five Savoia-Marchetti S-62 flying boats of a 1929 model, built in Spain between 1931 and 1935. At San Javier, there were two squadrons of nine machines each; at Barcelona seven machines, of which four were under repair. At Mahón, capital of Minorca, there were five of these flying boats, together with another five at Marín on the north-west Atlantic coast.

Very few of these aircraft survived the civil war. They were seen almost at once as out-of-date, which is why both sides, the Republic and Franco's insurgent Nationalists, as they insisted on being known, appealed at once for aircraft to other countries.

## **The air force remains loyal in Madrid, Barcelona, Los Alcázares and San Javier**

Major Ignacio Hidalgo de Cisneros y López de Montenegro, an aristocratic air force officer with a distinguished career in Morocco, who was soon to be the commander of the Republic's air force, returned to Spain in autumn 1935 after resigning from his post as an attaché in the embassy in Rome. He writes, significantly:

The atmosphere in the air force had changed greatly. The friendly comradeship that had kept us so united and had always been the main aspect of the air force had almost completely disappeared. Political tension had infiltrated our ranks and thus most airmen were in one or other political camp.<sup>16</sup>

Appointed on his return from Rome to a non-flying post by the right-wing government in the autumn of 1935, Hidalgo de Cisneros resumed his contacts with officers of progressive sympathies. He was disturbed to see officers of conservative views ostentatiously displaying right-wing newspapers such as the monarchist *ABC* or the Catholic-conservative *El Debate*. Although airmen had

never been noted for their piety in the past, now they were making a political statement of regularly attending Mass in their sky-blue uniforms. To the scandal of his own very Catholic family, Major Hidalgo de Cisneros had taken advantage of the new law allowing divorce and had married Constanca de la Mora, a woman divorced from Manuel Bolín, by coincidence the brother of Luis Bolín who, from London, had organized Franco's important flight from the Canaries to Morocco.

Sometime after returning from Rome, Hidalgo de Cisneros was posted as second in command at Tablada, the military base near Seville, which, he says, was notorious for the reactionary views of its officers. Such was the atmosphere that he was cut dead in the officers' bar and the mess. His reaction was to introduce an intensive rate of training, starting at five every morning and continuing for hours on end, and to insist on strict formation flying. He discovered that the mechanics were discreetly keeping guard and inspecting the plane he flew lest his enemies interfered with it.

In February 1936, the electoral victory of the Popular Front led to the appointment to important posts of senior and trusted officers. One of them was General Miguel Núñez de Prado who was made head of the air force. He immediately posted Hidalgo de Cisneros to Madrid as his personal assistant and trusted subordinate. They and Lieutenant Colonel Luis Riaño, another highly placed officer of progressive Republican views, saw their task as to move politically suspect officers to posts where they could not threaten the Republic. When Santiago Casares Quiroga became Prime Minister of the Popular Front government on 13 May 1936, Hidalgo de Cisneros was appointed his aide-de-camp, but he was ordered to continue his task of moving distrusted commanding officers out of the two main Madrid bases, Cuatro Vientos and Getafe, and instructed to post reliable Republican officers to the other major airfields. Hidalgo de Cisneros and some other loyal officers removed weapons stored in preparation for a coup at the flying school at Alcalá de Henares, some 20 miles east of Madrid. The tension among the officers in the early summer of 1936 was great. Hidalgo de Cisneros was a likely target for hostile officers or for the gunmen who had assassinated a well-known left-wing infantry officer, Captain Faraudo. Hidalgo de Cisneros and others spent sleepless nights watching out for signs of insurrection in the Madrid air bases and organizing vigilance with the use of the Socialist Youth movement and the Communist Party. Such actions were interpreted by conservative officers as preparation for the revolution which they were already anxiously expecting.

During the night of 12–13 July 1936, armed police officers took revenge for the murder of another left-wing officer by arresting and murdering José Calvo Sotelo, leader of the right-wing National Front. Although the uprising had been long planned, the murder by uniformed police of a leading opposition politician probably resolved many officers' doubts. One week later, the garrisons in Spanish