

# SPANISH CIVIL WAR TANKS

The Proving Ground for Blitzkrieg



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ILLUSTRATED BY TONY BRYAN

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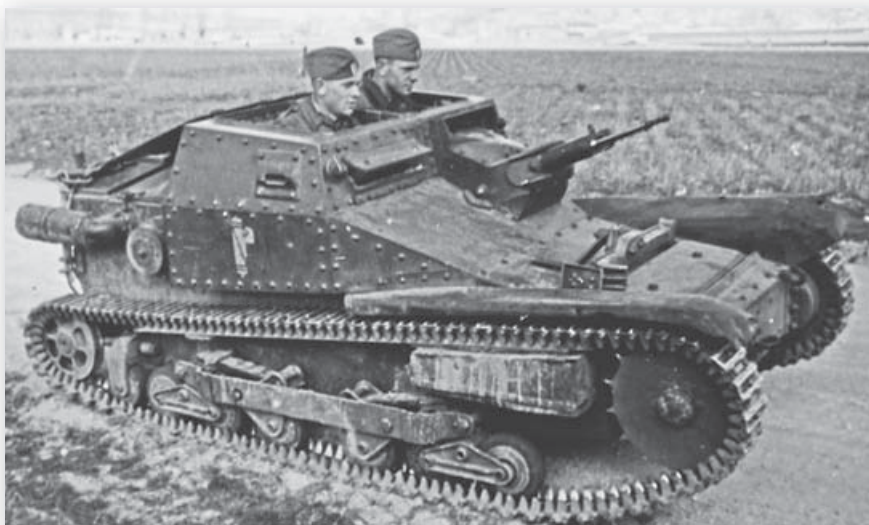
## THE PROVING GROUND FOR BLITZKRIEG

### INTRODUCTION

The dominant tank in the Spanish Civil War was the Soviet T-26. This captured Republican T-26 Model 1937 was put on display in front of the Gran Kursaal in San Sebastián in 1938 after its capture near Tremp-Lérida. (NARA)

The Spanish Civil War was the first European conflict to see the extensive use of tanks since their debut in World War I. It came at a crucial time in European tank development, when production went from a few hundred tanks per year to many thousands. The Great Powers looked to the Spanish conflict to validate their own tank programs and to learn any important lessons about tank warfare. The Spanish Civil War has been regarded as the proving ground for blitzkrieg. Spain was seen as a laboratory for Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union to test out their tanks and tactical doctrine on the eve of World War II.





The Carro Veloce CV 3/35 was the most common version of the Italian tankette in service in Spain, though some of the earlier CV 3/33s were also used. The fasces marking on the superstructure side indicates a command vehicle. (NARA)

This book will argue that in fact the Spanish Civil War provided few clear tactical lessons. Tank employment in Spain was unique, and so no sober observer could draw any profound conclusions about the nature of future tank warfare. Tanks were used in relatively small numbers by poorly trained crews with little or no tactical understanding by senior commanders. Many armies did use the Spanish experience to validate their own preconceptions about tank warfare, but this was a misuse of the lessons. While the Spanish Civil War did not have a major impact on the development of tank doctrine, it had significant influence on tank design. The tanks used in the conflict were lightly armored and armed mostly with machine guns. The important exception was the Soviet T-26, which was armed with a powerful 45mm dual-purpose gun. This tank so dominated the Spanish battlefield that it ended once and for all the question about whether machine-gun-armed tanks were viable. They were not, and suddenly most European armies realized that their substantial investment in machine-gun-armed tanks in the early 1930s was seriously flawed.

Spain also saw the first widespread use of dedicated antitank guns, notably the German Rheinmetall 37mm and its Soviet copy, the 45mm antitank gun. When skillfully used, these weapons could prove to be an effective counter to rampaging tanks. While the Spanish conflict did not decisively demonstrate the relative balance between tank and antitank warfare, it strongly suggested that the cheap and lightly armored tanks of the 1930s were too vulnerable. The lessons of the war spurred the production of medium tanks, which would form the steel core of Europe's armies in World War II.

## TANK TECHNOLOGY ON THE EVE OF WAR

In the wake of World War I, most European armies neglected further tank development. An ample supply of tanks was still on hand from the war, and the meager defense budgets of the 1920s did not encourage expensive new programs. Germany was forbidden tanks under the Versailles Treaty and the Soviet Union was still licking its wounds after a debilitating civil war. Tank development began to accelerate in the early 1930s. The World War I tanks had been mechanically arthritic even in their prime, and by the 1930s were mostly worn out.