

Michael Alpert, *Franco and the Condor Legion*. The Spanish Civil War in the Air, Bloomsbury, 2019.

Many aspects of the Spanish Civil War are still waiting to be researched and further explored. This is amply reflected in recent military historiography on recruiting mechanisms, the socio-cultural factors influencing the armies and the rearguard, the rearguard itself, occupation policies or the 'total' war in Spain. Some more widely known aspects, however, call for greater analysis. One of these is the war in the air, to which Michael Alpert, one of the great experts on the military history of the Spanish conflict, has dedicated his attention and his most recent book (2020, in Spanish).

Alpert's work and his books on the 'Azaña reform' or the military and international history of the Spanish Civil War are indisputable references, with their masterful erudition, millimetric precision and irrefutable significance. For many historians, myself included, his work on the Republican Army is the best available on the subject. While his latest book on aerial warfare in Spain does not present new research from direct sources or an especially innovative re-reading, it brilliantly opens up an incredibly timely topic that was in dire need of revision from a trans-national conceptual perspective. All in all, this could be the most complete and balanced synthesis you will find on the subject.

Alpert moves with ease in this terrain, though it implies methodological choices that cannot always be shared. As the book deals with aerial warfare, the author sets out to review every moment (which is easier said than done, as we will see) in which the 'war in the air' was relevant in the context of the Spanish Civil War. The text covers everything from Franco's flight in the *Dragon Rapide* to the deaths of Sanjurjo and Mola in plane crashes, to Italy sending planes to assist the uprising in Morocco, to aviation in the Aragon and Catalonia campaigns and the Battle of the Ebro. Alpert is most at home with a purely empirical deployment of information, which he uses as the basis for the narrative architecture of his book. However, the book title points to a backdrop that can be identified as interpretative by presenting the German Condor Legion as the central element in the aerial war from decisive, technical and geostrategic points of view.

With utmost respect, I find I cannot agree with this choice of title. First, for all its limitations and virtues, this is not a book about the Condor legion, but the aerial dimension of the Spanish Civil War, which makes the choice of title incomprehensible. Second and more importantly, this choice inevitably generates a bias that colours the overall reading of the volume. No matter how much attention Alpert gives to the participation of Soviet aviation, the meagre air capacity of nationals and republicans, or to Italian intervention, the title underscores the centrality of Nazi Germany in an aerial war where it in fact had to compete with Italy for prominence and relevance in combat. Methodologically and interpretatively speaking, in my opinion the decision to call the book *Franco and the Condor Legion* seems to substantially under-represent the participation of their Italian allies/rivals in the conflict, among other things.

Admittedly, my own research and extensive work with Italian sources has informed my views. If Alpert had spent more time there, he would have clearly seen how some of the more frequently occurring interpretations in the extant literature – relating to aerial

support for the coup d'état, for example – should be placed in quarantine. The book might be called *Franco and the Condor Legion*, but it was Mussolini, not Hitler, who sent the planes that broke the tactical stalemate of July-August 1936, in a bid that clearly exceeded the boundaries of limited risk for Italy. On several occasions, Alpert allows himself to be carried along by some of the more prominent clichés of international historiography concerning the Italian war in Spain, including his alleged rejection of violence among Spaniards. If one looks beyond the diaries of Ciano or the declarations of Ettore Muti, the future Secretary General of the Partito Nazionale Fascista, it is easy to observe how the Italian command that was deployed in Spain did not question the violence but its scope in strategic terms. Far from feeling sorry for the Spanish people (as has so often been asserted) or criticizing the murders, they openly participated in it. Muti prided himself on how they had completely devastated Madrid from the air in 1936. Meanwhile, Ciano boasted about the terror that the *Aviazione Legionaria* had deployed on the civilian populations of Aragon, Catalonia and the Levant.

Alpert is not entirely responsible for this; much of it corresponds to Civil War narratives from every quarter, antifascist to liberal to Christian democrat, which openly underestimate and disregard Italian deployment in the Spanish conflict. I call it the 'Guadalajara syndrome': which has been used to mock them or to reduce expectations by applying the cliché of valiant, good-natured Italians – *brava gente, noi non sappiamo odiare* – who were lured over on the pretext of enjoying a little tourism (sexual tourism, generally) in Spain. However, it is more responsible for those clichés causing omissions that do not allow a better approach to the aerial performance of the different actors. For example, he cites the bombing of Barcelona by General Giuseppe Valle in March 1938 but omits what Valle himself did on New Year's Day 1938 to demonstrate that Italian planes carrying a tonne of bombs could strike more than a thousand kilometres away from Italy. It was in fact a technical experiment, or as Ciano would later call it, a 'great lesson for the future' (one that left dozens of children dead on the ground, if we tell the whole story).

As a matter of fact, what one misses most in this book, on an interpretative plane, is a treatment of Spain as the laboratory for total war. The Italians experimented with aerial warfare and the Germans did too. In fact, Guernica is not the only township in Spain that bears the historical scars of German air raids. The Condor Legion was responsible for the bombing of the Levantine rearguard municipalities of Ares del Maestre, Benassal, Vilar de Canes, and Albocàsser in May 1938. The unprotected civilians in those small towns were massacred to test the dive-bombing reliability of German Stukas. None of those places appear in Alpert's book.

Some problems also arise concerning how the information is managed, which may be linked to a desire for synthesis. Alpert's dating is unfortunate, because he knows perfectly well that though Franco was named supreme commander – *Generalísimo* – of all the armed forces on 28 September, it became effective on 1 October 1936 (not 30 September). He also knows that the Basque Statute of Autonomy was approved on that same 1 October (not 6 October). Certain issues, such as not including the Canary Islands on the territorial map of Spain, may be attributable to editorial oversight. Others, such as referring to the Basque city of Vitoria as 'Navarrese' or 'the capital of Navarre',

literally sear the reader's retinas. Fortunately, most of the book is free from such errors, which have been rectified in the Spanish edition. Though few, they were entirely avoidable and overexpose the weaknesses of the book.

Stanley Payne presents this book as 'the best one-volume account of the air war in Spain, in English or Spanish'. This gives us an idea of the state of the literature concerning the air war in Spain. The inexistence of comprehensive research, from new direct sources, with brave hypotheses that allow us to nuance the fragmented state of the question on this subject can undoubtedly be mitigated by Alpert's book. It offers a good and necessary synthesis to which interpretative texture can be added. This book seeks to provide a comprehensive approach to the different aspects of air combat in the Spanish Civil War and no one knows its potential and limitations better than the author. In my opinion, however, the great history of the war in the air in Spain, one that incorporates interpretation and original sources, has yet to be written.

Javier Rodrigo  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona