

# The march on Madrid

## Gaming the Spanish Civil War part 1

**Andrew Rolph** describes a system for generating a series of games to simulate the Army of Africa's remarkable advance on Madrid from August to November 1936. As usual, there are plenty of ideas to translate to other settings. Photos courtesy of Minairons Miniatures.

### PREAMBLE

It's funny how things come into being. I've had an article on command and control half written for about six months now, but have never had the inspiration to finish it. Then suddenly, a few nights ago at the club I attend (Chase Wargames – find us on Facebook – it's a new fangled thing I don't hold with), Alan (my regular opponent, who also complains that he never gets a mention) and I wrapped up the third game in our latest campaign and were discussing what might be next. At some point, he said he fancied another Spanish Civil War one (we had already done the Battle of Jarama, which had inspired the

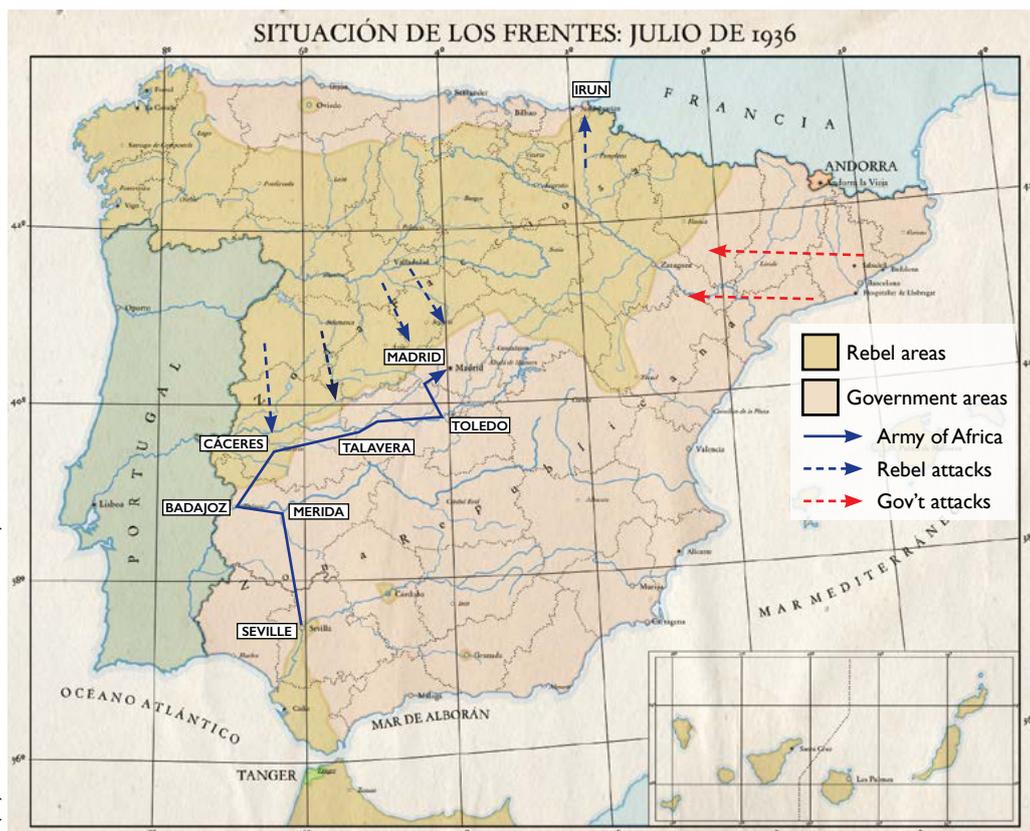
Command Challenge in *MWBG* issue 368) and I muttered something about a couple of possibilities. Within a couple of hours of getting home, the entire thing had come to me in a flash (well, an extended flash) and it was largely written in the next few days. So the article on command and control gestates for months and months and this is ready in a matter of weeks. Go figure.

So what you have here is a system which generates a series of games which simulate the 500 kilometre advance on Madrid of the Army of Africa between 2nd August and mid-November 1936. It is inspired by Martin Rapier's *Race to Leningrad* campaign (which is excellent and may be found in various forms on the internet), but I think enough has changed beyond the basic skeleton for me to claim this as my own. The main information source was *La Marcha sobre Madrid* by José Manuel Martínez Bande.

### BACKGROUND

July 17th 1936 saw the beginning of a military-led coup in Republican Spain. In Spanish North Africa, and the following day across the rest of mainland Spain, a number of officers led their men in an attempt to take over the running of the country. The coup, however, failed. Spontaneously, those who felt most threatened by an army takeover – principally the urban and rural workforce – rose up and initiated a counter-revolution. In support they formed untrained, poorly armed militia units (known as 'columns') and, with the assistance in some cases of loyal paramilitary police and parts of the army, they defeated the attempted takeover in much of Spain and in the majority of its principle cities, including the capital, Madrid.

For the remainder of the month, an uncoordinated struggle raged across Spain as battle lines formed. When the dust had cleared, each faction had gained control of



two unconnected areas. The Government held the south east, Catalonia, Aragon and a strip of territory on the north coast. The rebels held an east-west strip anchored on the Portuguese border and an unconnected enclave in the south, including the whole of Spanish North Africa. The original Rebel plan was now in disarray and arguably the Government at this point could have ended the uprising in fairly short order. It required a coordinated action to ensure that the two parts that the Rebels held could not join up and that, critically, the Army of Africa be contained within that continent.

The Army of Africa consisted of the Spanish Foreign Legion and Spain's Moroccan allies. These troops were the only ones in Spain with any recent fighting experience and had an extremely well developed *esprit de corps*. Given the Government's control of the Navy, it was possible at this point to blockade that force in Africa. However, the spontaneous uprising which prevented the coup's initial success now prevented the Government from ensuring its own survival. Riven by multiple factions, the central authority to deliver the death blow to the coup was absent. By the beginning of August, the Army of Africa was being transported to the mainland by planes supplied by Germany and by small boats across the Straits of Gibraltar. Spain was plunged into a civil war.

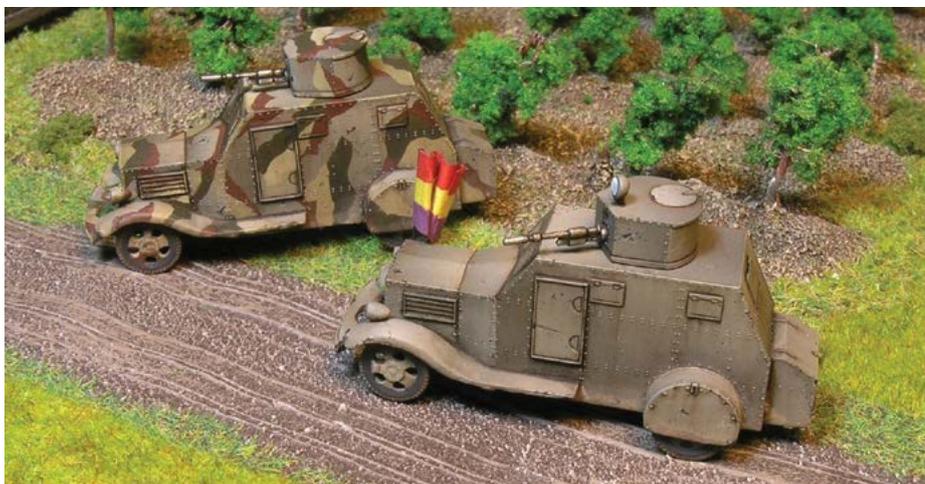
The Rebel forces improvised a new plan to end that war quickly. In their northern area, General Mola was short of troops and, more particularly, ammunition. His forces were fully tied up severing the Government's land link with France through Irún, holding back their advance on Zaragoza and pressing south towards Madrid over the Guadarrama mountain range. However, it was clear that his forces would be unlikely to reach the capital and needed resupply urgently. That resupply

was to be effected by linking the northern and southern Rebel areas, with the Army of Africa driving north from Seville where it was (slowly) concentrating. Thereafter, as more troops arrived, that force would turn northeast and attack Madrid, hoping to end war swiftly. On the 2nd and 3rd August 1936, the March on Madrid began.

What is perhaps surprising is just how few troops were involved in the campaign. The units of the Army of Africa were organized into 'columns' – groupings which had served it well in pacification actions in the twenties in North Africa. The first two to set out each consisted of a *bandera* (battalion) of the *Tercio de Extranjeros* (Foreign Legion) and a *tabor* (a half battalion) of Moroccans, supported by a battery of field artillery and a company of engineers. Later in the campaign, a further four or five such columns were formed of a similar composition and, with a few additional troops picked up along the way, that was the sum total of the forces aiming to take a major European city.

Nevertheless, the campaign was initially very successful. From Seville, the first two columns struck north and took the town of Mérida. From there, they diverted to the west to take Badajoz in a bloody battle [see *Battlegames issue 3*. Ed] before returning to the north to link up with General Mola's forces at Cáceres. From there, the columns moved east along the Tagus valley to Talavera, which they took by the first week of September – a march of some 400 kilometres in less than 40 days.

This rate of advance was achievable because of the paucity of the opposition facing them. Largely militia, the Government forces disdained the use of trenches, were prone to abandon positions when outflanked and were panicked by



Icons of the Spanish Civil War: (above) the Bilbao armoured car; (right) the Russian T26 light tank and (top right) the Fiat CR32 fighter.

Although initially designed as an anti-riot vehicle for the *Guardia de Asalto* police, the 1936 military uprising against the Republic forced them to press the Bilbao into field service as a fighting vehicle, thus filling the republican armour gap until the first Russian tanks were delivered.

The T26 was the most successful tank of its time, and the Spanish Republic purchased 281 of them – all of the single turreted type B. They were perceived by the Nationalists as so dangerous that a reward of 500 pesetas was offered to anyone capturing one.

During the SCW, the Italian Air Force deployed at least 400 Fiat CR.32 "Freccia" fighters, so being employed in the conflict in larger numbers than any other fighter; of these, about 130 were delivered directly to the Spanish Nationalist Air Force.





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(Top left) the Polikarpov I-15 Chato; (above) the Panzer I Ausf A and (left) the Renault FT-17 tank.

The Polikarpov I-15 was known in Spain as "Chato" (flat-nosed), but also as "Curtiss" among the Nationalists, for its similarity to the American-made Curtiss F9C "Sparrowhawk".

The 20mm Breda gun version of the Panzer IA was a Spanish Nationalist home-made improvement in 1937, aimed at increasing its firepower against the powerful guns of Republican armour. One such "modificado" tank had to be assigned to each standard Panzer section.

In 1922 Spain purchased 11 Renault tanks for use in the Rif War in Morocco. Six more were later purchased as replacements. At the outbreak of the SCV, there were ten, divided into two groups or 'regiments' of five. Those in Saragossa fell into Nationalist hands, while the others armed the Republic in Madrid. More were later bought from Poland by both sides.

the appearance of aircraft. They were frequently numerous but poorly equipped, many never having fired a rifle before. They tended to be, individually, remarkably brave, but this was a poor substitute for the lack of professional military expertise.

At Talavera, the rebels were only some 120 kilometres from Madrid. They had reason to expect that their rate of march ought not to be slowed too much and could therefore look forward to taking the city within a fortnight or three weeks. Perhaps that in part accounted for their next move – which was a diversion away from the capital.

The city of Toledo lay to the south-east and was of interest for two reasons. On the one hand, it was a centre of arms manufacture and therefore of interest to both sides. In addition, however, it was the location of a huge fort, a military training centre called the Alcázar, which had been besieged by Government forces since the initial failure of the coup. It therefore also had a propaganda value, particularly to General Franco (head of the Army of Africa) who could reasonably expect to cement his growing dominance within the Rebel cause if he were to relieve the fort. The rate of advance slowed notably at this point, as a greater amount of coordination crept into the Government's defences, the number (if not the efficacy) of counter-attacks increased and exhaustion began to affect the Rebels. Nevertheless, the Alcázar was relieved on the 27th September and Franco became head of the Rebels, who began to term themselves *Nacionales*.

The stage was set for the final thrust on Madrid. Franco returned to the Talavera area and reorganised his columns, feeding in fresh units arriving from Africa. The Government forces at this time began to benefit from aid from the Soviet Union in the form of tanks, armoured cars, advisors and

equipment. The failings of the militia had been noted and the Government's response was to create a new army and to incorporate the militia columns of all factions. The Ejército Popular de la República (Popular Army of the Republic) would be a traditional organisation with an emphasis on discipline and obedience to orders. It would, however, take time to form and, regardless of their being officially incorporated into an Army, the militias remained untrained and under-equipped. Soviet aid was generally reserved for the newly formed battalions of the Army just coming on line from this time and under the command of trustworthy Communist Party members.

The main assault to take Franco's forces to Madrid began around 7th October. The Government had fortified the capital with four concentric rings of defences, mobilizing the population of the capital to do so. These defences (centred around Valmojado and Navalcarnero, 30–40 km from Madrid), coupled with the appearance of some better-equipped troops and the coordination afforded by the adoption of an army hierarchy, allowed the Government forces to further slow Franco's rate of advance. Nevertheless, that advance continued and, by 4th November, Government forces were defending Campamento and Carabanchel – suburbs of Madrid within two or three kilometres of the centre of the capital.

The final assault began on 7th November and continued until 23rd November when Franco called off the battle. Small incursions were made into the Government defences. The River Manzanares, which bounded the western outlook of the city, was breached in one place allowing a long, finger-like incursion into the University City, which was never recovered. However, the Government troops outnumbered Franco's forces by perhaps four to one, and the expert fieldcraft exhibited by



(Left) the Hispano Suiza MC-36; (below left) the Grumman FF-1/GE-23 and (below) the IGC Sadurni tractor & howitzer.

The Hispano Suiza was built on their T-69 heavy truck chassis and was created to compete with the Bilbao armoured car for equipping the Security Forces of the Spanish Republic. Some were later captured by the Nationalists.

The Spanish Republic purchased 34 Grumman GE-23s in 1937, by presenting forged Turkish credentials to bypass the USA embargo! GE-23s fought actively the conflict, but were outclassed by opposing fighters (records can only be found of a single recorded 'kill') and losses were high.

Among the several IGC Sadurni variants, including a troop carrier and a tiny tankette, this tractor fared best and was even produced after the May 1937 riots, when the factory was seized from CNT hands by the Republican Government. Variants of this tractor are known with two headlights, or just one, as well as with or without mudguards.



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the Army of Africa was of little use in an urban environment which played far more to the militia's previous street fighting experience. The march had finally been halted.

Madrid did not fall in November 1936 and remained in the Government's hands for the remainder of a three-year war before it was taken in the last days without a shot being fired.

## THE CAMPAIGN

There will be a variable number of Campaign Turns, each representing a variable time period of between one and four weeks. The minimum number of turns would be four and would represent a crushing Rebel victory, with their forces reaching the outskirts of Madrid and breaking through the initial defence line by about the start of October (around six weeks earlier than was historically the case).

Each campaign turn generates a different battle and the Rebel player selects the troops appropriate to that battle from all those under his command – troops of the Army of Africa. Although a number of battalions are available to him, it will be rare for all the Rebel troops to appear in any battle. Generally speaking, he will want to rest as many battalions as possible to recuperate losses, whilst committing sufficient to win the tabletop battles. The Rebel player keeps track of his losses through battle and attrition as he advances across the Campaign Track (see next instalment); the magnitude and speed of that advance being determined by the extent of his victory (or defeat) in the tabletop battles.

The Government player's forces are generated randomly for each battle. Generally they will consist of about a brigade of troops (four or five battalions). The Government player does not keep track of losses. Each battle's force is generated

independently of previous battles.

The campaign is designed for games at a level where one stand equals one platoon or battery and the main unit of manoeuvre is the battalion, with three to five such formations on each side in each game. It is also written with a set of modified *Spearhead* rules in mind. However, where necessary, I will highlight certain special considerations which other rulesets might want to account for. There is no reason not to play the games as a micro version of the campaign by representing each stand as a section or even a man, whilst maintaining the ratios between forces – if that is your preference.

## WINNING

To win the campaign, the Rebels must have created a bridgehead over the River Manzanares on the outskirts of Madrid by the turn commencing week 15. If they achieve this by week 10, then the assault to take Madrid can proceed immediately and the Civil War will be a short one. Within 11 to 14 weeks, then the capital is unlikely to fall, but the Rebel player has certainly performed better than was historically the case. If the Rebels do not reach the outskirts of the capital by week 15, then it is a moral and tactical Government victory... although strategically, it remains a loss or a draw. In reality, the Government held the capital to the last day of the war – but it was a war they still lost. However, if the Rebels are halted before Valmorado, then it is at least arguable that the Government could have won the war. If halted at Badajoz, then the outcome would very likely have been a Government victory. Such results are, however, as unlikely in this campaign as in the actual one upon which it is based.

More details of the campaign next month.