

THIS MONTH

IN THE NOT TOO DISTANT PAST

Breaking out in July 1936, **John Davis** looks back on the devastation of the Spanish Civil War



It is morning in a small town in Andalucía, southern Spain. A man appears sheepishly from the door of his small stone house in a narrow backstreet. He is forced to shield his eyes with both hands as the sun climbs high into the sky. It is too white, too bright, too intense and it will take time to get accustomed to the glare again. He stumbles down the cobbled street, unsure of his footing as his outstretched hands continue to cover his eyes. The man, let's call him Xavier, is a 'mole' (topo). This is the name given to Republican supporters during the Spanish Civil War who finished on the losing side and were forced to go into hiding, some for over 30 years, until the Spanish government issued an amnesty exonerating them.

When the Nationalist faction led by Francisco Franco won the Spanish Civil War in 1939, Republican left-wing adherents, trade unionists

and local officials were brutally purged. Many were executed, some barbarically without trial, or sent to concentration camps. To escape what became known as the "White Terror" many individuals dug secret compartments in their own homes beneath floorboards, behind false walls or inside bricked-up basements. For years, emerging inside their homes only during the hours of darkness, they were entirely reliant on close family to maintain their secrecy and keep them alive. Many remained buried for decades hoping the Franco regime would collapse. Their womenfolk were forced to buy extra food without arousing the suspicions of neighbours or Fascist authorities, enduring an all-pervading threat from betrayal and constant house searches.

One of the most famous of these 'moles' was Manuel Cortes Quero, known as The Mole of Mija.

He was the last Republican mayor of Malaga. He returned home in 1939 and hid in his wife's home for some thirty years until he was finally granted amnesty in 1969. Another former socialist major, Protasio Montalvo spent thirty-eight years hidden in a basement in the Madrid region before he deemed it safe enough to emerge.

The Spanish Civil War, often eclipsed in the history books by the great worldwide conflagration that was soon to follow it, broke out in July 1936 and lasted for almost three years.

The spark that ignited the conflict came when military generals including Franco launched a coup against the democratically elected Second Spanish Republic. While the coup failed to take over the whole country, it split the nation in two and plunged Spain into a three-year war.

The left-wing Republicans including leading socialists and trade unionists attracted the support of the Soviet Union and its ranks were also swelled by international brigades, volunteers from over fifty different countries including many from Britain and the United States. Among their ranks were well-known writers like George Orwell (*Homage to Catalonia*) and author-journalist Ernest Hemingway who used the conflict in Spain as the setting for some of his best-known novels including *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Death in the Afternoon*. Many other novelists, poets and artists gave their support as non-combatants. These included Pablo Picasso whose artistic depiction of the saturation bombing of Guernica in the Basque country, has become a priceless masterpiece. It is now owned by the Spanish government and is on display at the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid.

The Nationalists, with strong Fascist leanings, were backed by Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy and included many seeking a return to the monarchy and hard-line followers of the Roman Catholic Church. Franco flew from his base in the Canary Islands to Morocco to take command of the 'Army of Africa' at the outbreak of the war but without the assistance of German equipment might never have been able to transport his troops across the Straits of Gibraltar. Involvement in the war also permitted the German military to fine tune its logistics and hone its tactics both on the ground and in the air. Their fighting force became known as The Condor Legion and initially numbered some 7000 personnel. It sharpened their capabilities and would play an important part later in the highly successful and rapid invasions of Poland, the Low Countries and France in the early years of the Second World War. In an apparent about face

however and much to the chagrin of both Hitler and Mussolini, Franco reneged on his promise to join the Axis powers at the start of the Second World War in September 1939. He demanded large territorial and military concessions and was so heavily reliant on Allied food and oil that he maintained a practical, defensive neutrality.

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In total the Spanish Civil War claimed some half a million lives and devastated the whole country fostering resentments that lasted decades. While Franco, with superior military force, consolidated absolute power over the Nationalist forces, the Republicans suffered from bouts of in-fighting between its various factions. By early 1939, the Nationalists had captured much of the land held by the Republicans and the fall of Madrid in March 1939 effectively brought hostilities to a close. In addition to the death toll, the war resulted in massive displacement and emigration with up to half a million refugees fleeing to neighbouring France where many were later interned following the Nazi occupation. In Spain, Franco established a strict authoritarian regime, ruling as Caudillo (military leader/political strongman), until his death in 1975 when he was replaced by the return of the monarchy, Juan Carlos, and democratic government.

One of the most accurate depictions of the conditions that 'moles' were forced to live under is shown in the Spanish/French film *The Endless Trench (La Trincheras Infinita)*. It was released in 2019 and is directed by Jon Garano, Aitor Arregi and Jose Mari Goenaga. The film can be streamed on Netflix.

Semi-retired and living in Lyme Regis, John Davis started working life as a newspaper journalist before moving on to teach in schools, colleges and as a private tutor. He is a history graduate with Bachelors and Masters degrees from Bristol University with a particular interest in the History of Education and Twentieth Century European History.