

Great Battles

# BATTLE OF THE EBRO

*This huge campaign sealed the Spanish Republic's defeat nearly half a year before the government's formal surrender*

WORDS JULES STEWART

On the morning of 1 April 1939, Spaniards switched on their radios to listen to the high-pitched voice of Francisco Franco, the pudgy general from Galicia, who plunged Spain into three years of civil war that left half a million dead and a country in ruins. "On this day, having captured and disarmed the Communist army, the Nationalist troops have attained their last military objective. The war has ended." Not quite. Open combat between rival armies on the battlefield had effectively ceased. Within weeks of the ceasefire, bands

of Spanish ex-combatants, known as the Maquis, unleashed a guerrilla offensive from bases in France and in Spanish safe houses. The campaign lasted until the 1960s, with acts of sabotage and assassinations of Francoist troops and politicians which in the end, achieved little more than nuisance value. Spain was locked firmly in the dictator's grip and would remain so for nearly 40 years.

The Republic's death knell was in fact sounded five months before Franco's pronouncement, on the banks of the Ebro River in Catalonia, the scene of the longest battle of

the civil war and the bloodiest in Spain's long history of warfare. "The Battle of the Ebro was the fundamental turning point of the Spanish Civil War," says historian Jason Webster. "It was a last serious throw of the dice by the Republic against Franco's armies and an attempt to get off the back foot and impose a significant defeat on an enemy which, until that point, had had the upper hand for well over a year. Internally, within the Republican side, it was also the culmination of the rise of Communist power, with Communist forces and commanders at the forefront of the offensive."

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## OPPOSING FORCES



### NATIONALISTS

#### LEADERS

General Fidel Dávila  
 General Francisco Franco  
 General Joan Yagüe  
 Lieutenant General Rafael García Valiño  
 General Fernando Barrón

#### TROOPS

90,000

#### FIGHTER AIRCRAFT

100

#### BOMBERS

140

#### TANKS

100

#### GUNS

300

VS



### REPUBLIC

#### LEADERS

General Vicente Rojo Lluch  
 General Juan Modesto  
 General Enrique Lister  
 Lieutenant Colonel Etelvino Vega  
 Lieutenant Colonel Manuel Tagüeña

#### TROOPS

80,000

#### FIELD BATTERIES

70-80

#### ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS

27

#### TANKS

22

#### GUNS

150

By the time the attack was launched on 25 July, the Nationalist insurgents were already confident of their ultimate victory. The Battle of Teruel, fought between December 1937 and February 1938, had exhausted the resources of the Republican army. Given their slender supplies of material and with the French frontier closed to retreat, it was rash of the Republican commanders to choose this time to embark on an offensive. The lack of forethought and proper planning meant that the Republican drive across the Ebro was doomed to come to grief.

The rationale for taking this action was to stop Franco's advance on Valencia. The Popular Front government had left Madrid to establish their new headquarters in Valencia in November 1936. When the Nationalist campaign on the city began, in March 1939 Prime Minister Juan Negrín and his Cabinet Valencia made their final stand in Barcelona. The Ebro campaign saved the port city from capture but only temporarily, as it fell into Franco's hands a few weeks after the government's departure.

On the eve of the Ebro offensive, Republican troops for almost the first time since war had broken out in July 1936 resembled a corps of professional soldiers. They followed orders and the structure of a chain of command, rather than acting as the largely irregular and ill-disciplined militiamen of early days. Many of these men, a large number of them only teenagers, were to be involved in the amphibious crossing of the River Ebro. On an international level, there were hopes that political winds might be blowing in the Republic's favour, with tension increasing over Nazi Germany's demands to annex the Sudetenland. A new world war was in the offing,

one which Republican leader Negrín desperately hoped would bring Britain and France to his aid as part of a wider European conflict.

On the morning of 24 July, as final preparations for the attack were underway, Negrín warned the Republican war council in Barcelona of the need for the assault, arguing that Valencia would be lost unless there were a diversionary action elsewhere. The basic strategy was to hit the Nationalists' salient to the sea by forcing a passage across the Ebro at several points about 60 miles from the Mediterranean coast. The Ebro gamble which the Republic set into motion on the back of these assumptions did not pay off.

**“TROOPS ON THE EAST BANK SPENT WEEKS ASSEMBLING BOATS AND PONTOON BRIDGES AND, IN MANY CASES, LEARNING TO SWIM”**

“The aim was to confuse the communications between the Nationalists in the Levante and Catalonia and, if possible, strike across to restore land communications between Catalonia and the rest of Republican Spain,” according to British Hispanist Hugh Thomas. “To carry out this bold scheme, a new Army of the Ebro had been constituted under General Juan Modesto, consisting of the V Army Corps under Enrique Lister and the XV under Lieutenant Colonel

Manuel Tagüeña. The XVIII Army Corps was in reserve.” This force of about 100,000 men was supported by 70 to 80 field batteries and 27 anti-aircraft guns. All the leading commanders were Community Party militants.

Franco's decision to attack Valencia instead of advancing on the far bigger prize of Barcelona was hotly contested by members of his general staff. There were even hushed murmurs among high-ranking officers about removing him from command. There was some justification for this malcontent. Relieving the pressure on Barcelona enabled the Republican army to reorganise at the end of spring and beginning of summer 1938. With the mobilising of new drafts, the Republic's Chief of General Staff Vicente Rojo drew up a plan to unite the severed link between Levante and Catalonia by means of the all-out offensive along the Ebro River. Rojo's objective in planning this operation was to deal the enemy a definitive blow in order to lift the threat on Valencia. In doing so, the avuncular, bespectacled general argued he would seize the initiative from the Nationalist forces and reverse the course of the war.

On the night of 24-25 July, shortly after midnight, with no moon, several units of the Republican army under the command of the charismatic Communist General Enrique Lister began crossing the river in boats. The Battle of the Ebro, the longest and harshest of the whole war, was underway. The crossing points had been proposed by Michael Dunbar, the chief of staff of the XV International Brigade and graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge. As an aside, as late as 1942 complaints were raised in the British Parliament that despite having led



*International brigade soldiers with a Soviet Russian machine-gun, during the Spanish Civil War*

*A Spanish propaganda poster from the Spanish Civil War, with an illustration of armed soldiers and barbed wire and the words 'Defending Madrid is Defending Catalonia'*



more than 100,000 men at the Ebro, Dunbar ranked as a mere sergeant in the British Army. The crossing of the Ebro was from the outset a remarkable military operation. The 600-mile Ebro is the longest river running entirely in Spain. It is a mighty waterway, resembling along much of the army's crossing points a perilous monster poised to devour anyone who ventures into its waters. Republican troops on the east bank spent weeks assembling boats and pontoon bridges and, in many cases, learning to swim. It was easy work for Francoist spies to pass on this information to the Nationalist troops dug in on the left bank of the river, waiting in full readiness for the impending assault.

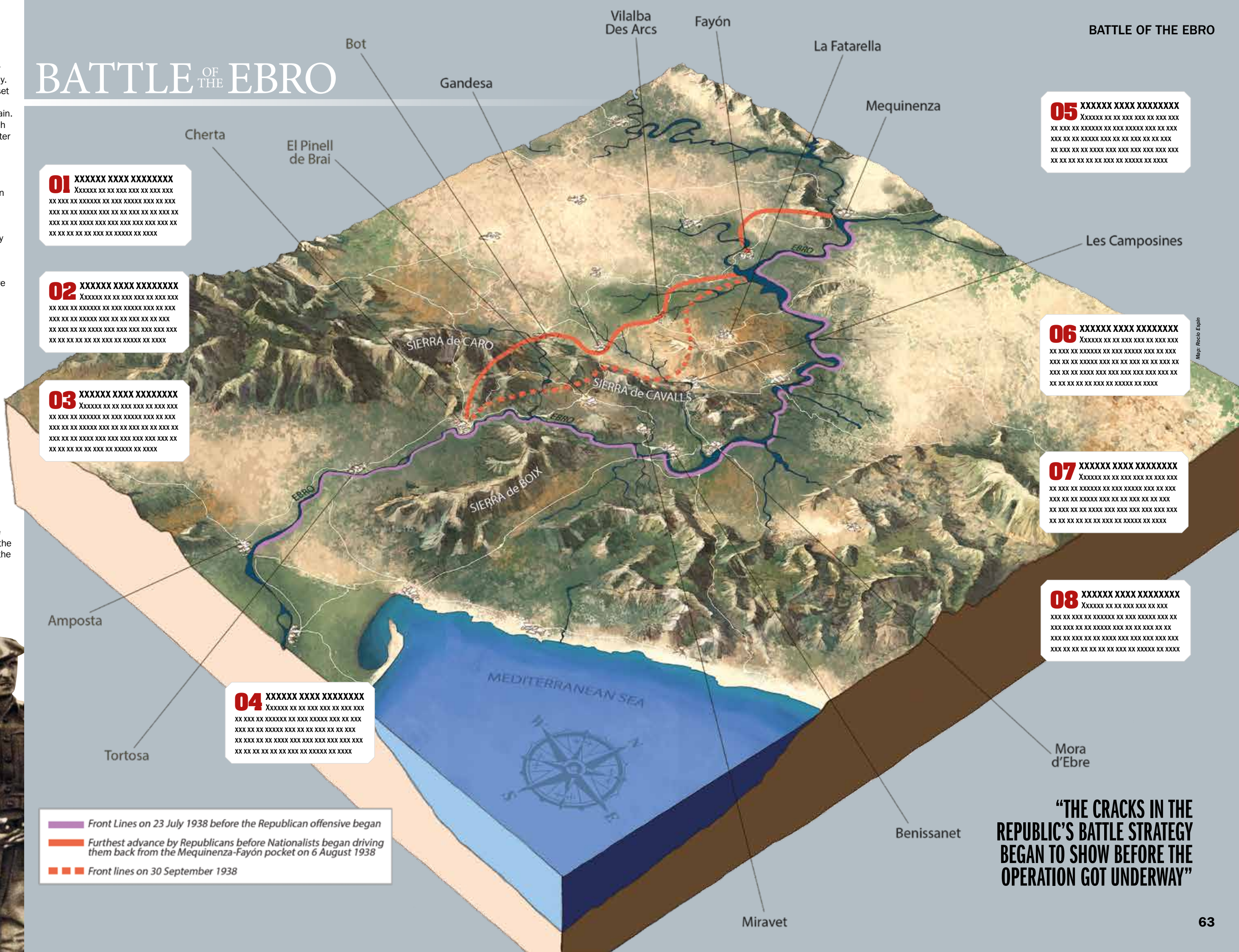
The cracks in the Republic's battle strategy began to show before the operation got underway. The date originally set for the amphibian assault was the night of 22-23 July. A shortage of artillery pieces and reserve ammunition made it necessary to delay the attack by 24 hours. Francoist spies were therefore able to relay this intelligence to the Nationalist commanders, thus depriving the Republican forces of the benefit of tactical surprise. Negrín had been informed of the army's need to stock up on equipment and supplies. In spite of the precarious situation, he was not prepared to grant a further delay.

The assault began at a quarter past midnight, following the plan devised by Dunbar. Units under Tagüeña made the crossing at points positioned between the towns of Mequinenza and Fayón. Lister and the V Army launched a simultaneous attack at several points between an arc formed by Fayón and Cherta, as well as the more important target of Amposta, 30 miles south near the sea. One hundred small boats, each carrying eight men, five pontoon bridges and another five of various construction had been assembled. Officers made the passage at the head of their men. Material would follow over the bridges, once they were safely swung across the river. Dunbar, who was witness to the events, reported that a tank became jammed on one of these bridges and delayed the shipment of

General Francisco Franco at the Battle of the Ebro



# BATTLE OF THE EBRO



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— Front Lines on 23 July 1938 before the Republican offensive began  
 — Furthest advance by Republicans before Nationalists began driving them back from the Mequinenza-Fayón pocket on 6 August 1938  
 - - - Front lines on 30 September 1938

**“THE CRACKS IN THE REPUBLIC’S BATTLE STRATEGY BEGAN TO SHOW BEFORE THE OPERATION GOT UNDERWAY”**



Republican soldiers cross the Ebro River during the Battle of the Ebro

material. It was a dark omen, for had it not been for this mishap, the Republican attack could have at least reached Alcañiz, well inland in the province of Teruel.

The north flank at Mequinenza-Fayón and Amposta to the south were considered secondary objectives. They were put under attack as a diversionary tactic, to distract the enemy's attention from the main offensive taking place between Riba-roja and Benifallet to halt the Nationalist drive on Valencia. Units of the Republican 3rd Division swiftly surrounded Riba-roja and by dawn the Francoist forces holding out in the village had surrendered. At the same time, other detachments of the 3rd captured a large petrochemical plant and marched on to the village of Flix on the banks of the Ebro. All was going well, or so it seemed. But then the Republican advance in the southern sector was stopped at Amposta, with a high loss in men and armaments. What was left of the units were forced to retreat across the river. The centre fared somewhat better at first. The Francoist forces were caught by surprise, not anticipating a major attack in this sector. Ascó and Flix were occupied and a dozen other villages in the insurgents' hands fell to the Republican army. Nobody imagined on that heady morning that Flix was taken with relative ease, that four months later this was to be the retreating point for the last remnants of the Republican forces, bringing to an end the Battle of the Ebro.

A portent of what lay in store for the Republican army was the near destruction of the 42nd Division, which was in the first wave

across with 9,500 troops. A fortnight later they returned to their base on the river's right bank with less than half their men: 12,000 losses, 1,000 killed for each day of fighting on a single front. As early as the end of July, foreign correspondents covering the Spanish Civil War were sending home dispatches that spoke of faltering hopes of a Republican victory. A story published by the *New York Times* three days after the crossing, under the headline 'Ebro Drive Meets Stiffer Resistance' said, "The Spanish Republican's offensive across the Ebro River is still making headway, although its progress has slowed down in the last 48 hours. The Republicans reached positions yesterday a few miles north of Gandesa, about 12 miles south of the Ebro. The latest news was that the insurgents were now holding firm."

In the first three days after the Republican attack, Franco ordered men and guns rushed

**"A FORTNIGHT LATER THEY RETURNED TO THEIR BASE ON THE RIVER'S RIGHT BANK WITH LESS THAN HALF THEIR MEN: 12,000 LOSSES, 1,000 KILLED FOR EACH DAY OF FIGHTING ON A SINGLE FRONT"**

from Zaragoza Province through Caspe and Alcañiz toward Gandesa, which was threatened from the north and east by Republican forces. Gandesa was a strategic position on the main Tarragona-Alcañiz road and its loss to the Republicans would have had a negative impact on Nationalist morale. The Republicans' nearest base for supplying their forces was the town of Falset in Tarragona Province, more than 20 miles away across the Ebro. This made it difficult to consolidate new positions and push attacks toward Gandesa, Caspe and Alcañiz.

While fierce fighting raged on the ground, Franco's German Luftwaffe allies launched continuous air attacks almost from the day the first Republican contingents set foot in insurgent-held territory. The strategy was to destroy the bridges to cut off any possibility of the Republic sending armoured reinforcements across the river. Republican engineers worked through the night to repair the damage.

There were days in which the Germans dropped a thousand or more tons of explosives on enemy positions. The Nationalist high command ordered the floodgates of several reservoirs opened to render the river impassable for small craft.

The Battle of the Ebro was for the Republican military commanders an uncomfortable replay of the battles at Belchite, Brunete and Teruel, in which a rapid loyalist advance was quickly halted, with the Nationalists moving with equal speed to recover lost ground. "The military rebels' advance through Catalonia seemed to be inevitable, it being the nearest and best



Ruins of the town of Belchite, near to Zaragoza at the area of Aragón

objective given the state of the Republican troops after the collapse of the Aragón front," explains Spanish military historian Julián Casanova. The Ebro offensive temporarily held up the Nationalist onslaught, as had been the case in previous battles. This time, Casanova says "it was almost throughout a defensive battle whose aim was to tire the adversary and force them to negotiate a victory that was less unconditional, rather than to defeat them, which was impossible. In the end, the Republic had lost the best of its army and soon afterwards the whole of Catalonia".

The decisive battle took place at Gandesa, the Nationalists' communications centre. Lister had rapidly advanced about 20 miles, taking his brigade within striking distance of the town. All the enemy's main observation points on high ground were captured, along with 4,000 Nationalist prisoners. Franco had meanwhile ordered seven divisional commanders to the front, while Lister kept up a desperate round-the-clock assault in the stifling August heat.

When the Republican advance was contained by the newly-arrived insurgent troops, the loyalists began digging in trenches. They suffered devastating high-altitude bombing and low strafing from rebel aircraft and their German allies, with hardly any resistance from the diminished anti-aircraft defences and fighters of their opponents.

On average, 10,000 tons landed every day on Republican positions. When the campaign of deadly attrition had ended, Gandesa was relieved and Franco had gained 150 square miles of newly-won territory.

The definitive turning of the tide came on 30 October, when the Nationalists launched their long-awaited counter offensive along the Ebro. The exhausted Republican positions were subjected to incessant bombardment by nearly 200 Nationalist and Italian Fascist batteries and more than 200 aircraft. The Republican air force could muster no more than 50 fighters, which made no impression on this aerial armada. On 3 November,

Lieutenant General Alfredo Galera, advancing through the village of Pinell, arrived at the Ebro. All the right flank of the Nationalist army had reached its objective. The Battle of the Ebro was as good as lost. The last Republican defence points were abandoned, while the final stages of the conflict were delayed by the snows of winter. On 18 November the last Republican contingents escaped the right bank of the river.

Estimates of casualties vary, but the figure of nearly 100,000 dead and wounded is generally accepted as close to accurate. The Battle of the Ebro cost the loyalist forces about 200 aircraft as well as a great store of military equipment of all kinds, including 1,800 machine-guns and 24,000 rifles. It is beyond dispute that the Republic had lost its army in the north of Spain and with it, the war.

Francisco Franco eating at his headquarters during the Battle of the Ebro, 1938

### FURTHER READING

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- ★ *NEW YORK TIMES*, 26 JULY 1938