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Spain's foreign fighters heed call to return

By Gideon Long

BARCELONA, Spain, Nov 12 (Reuters) - The Spanish Civil War was grinding towards its final bleak winter when the country's Communist leader Dolores Ibarruri said farewell to the International Brigades.

"Political reasons, reasons of state...are sending some of you back to your countries, others into forced exile," she told around 12,000 battle-weary soldiers at an emotional public meeting in Barcelona on October 29, 1938.

"We shall not forget you, and when the olive tree of peace puts forth its leaves again, entwined with the laurels of the Spanish Republic's victory -- come back! Come back to us."

More than half a century later, some 400 surviving brigaders, most now in their eighties, have answered that call, returning to the country they risked their lives to defend in the 1936-39 war.

Over recent days they arrived in Barcelona, rekindling memories of that farewell rally in 1938, when the leftist Spanish Republic -- despite Ibarruri's confidence -- teetered on the brink of defeat.

"It was an emotional day rather than a sad day," recalled Benny Goldman, a British brigader from Manchester. "We weren't happy to be leaving because we wanted to fight on, but it was a wonderful atmosphere -- the sunshine and the crowds of people who came to thank us for our efforts."

Three months later Barcelona fell to the forces of rebellious General Francisco Franco. Madrid followed, and with it fell the Republic, opening the way for 36 years of rightist dictatorship in Spain.

The brigaders scattered. Many continued their fight against fascism elsewhere in Europe. Some were imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps. Others fled to exile in the Americas and the Soviet Union.

"Defeat in Spain was difficult to take," said 81-year-old Milton Wolff, a New York Jew who commanded the Lincoln Battalion of U.S. brigaders. "We were assuring everyone Madrid would be the tomb of fascism.

"But it wasn't something I had time to dwell on because World War Two was starting and we had a new front to fight on. The Spanish war was ending in March (1939). By September Hitler was in Poland.

"I didn't have time to mourn for Spain, which we all saw as the first great fight against fascism. I just had time to tell the world 'I told you so'."

More than 40,000 volunteers from more than 50 countries, many recruited by communist parties and trade unions, came to fight in Spain, driven by ideals and a collective fear of what defeat for its government might mean for the rest of Europe.

Dismayed by their own governments' policies of non- intervention, they banded together to form a makeshift army, united by the cry "No Pasaran!" (They shall not pass!).

Around 20 percent of the international brigaders died in Spain and many of the others were wounded.

"I came to Paris from Havana in 1937," said Oscar Gonzalez, a Cuban volunteer now aged 80. "I heard about what was happening in Spain and I had to go. I crossed the Pyrenees on foot and joined the other Cubans fighting here."

The ideological war threw up strange confrontations and at times pitted soldiers against their own countrymen.

"I fought the Italian fascists at Guadalajara (northeast of Madrid)," recalled Vincenzo Tonelli, a veteran of Italy's Garibaldi Battalion. "They retreated so quickly they left behind weapons and milk and cheese for us!"

For many of the 400 veterans in Barcelona this week marked their first return to Spain since the war.

They came because the Spanish parliament has offered them honorary citizenship as a welcome if belated gesture of gratitude for the part they played in defending the doomed Republic of the 1930s.

The gesture has fallen slightly flat as, under Spanish law, the veterans would have to renounce their current citizenship and benefits in order to take up the offer.

Additionally, critics of Spain's conservative government have accused it of snubbing the veterans by failing to send senior representatives to pay homage to them in Madrid last week.

For some, this is evidence that the ideological differences that tore Spain apart in the 1930s, at the cost of over a million lives, still exist.

But for the veterans, the enthusiasm many young Spaniards have shown for them during their visit has more than compensated for any lingering rightist bitterness dating from the Civil War.

"From now on, we not only carry Spain in our hearts, from today we are all Spaniards," German veteran Julius Goldstein told his former comrades at a ceremony in the Spanish parliament in the capital.

"The reception we've been given, especially by the young Spaniards, has been incredible," said 80-year-old Ernest Kuntschik, an Austrian Jew who spent six years in the Nazi Dachau concentration camp after the Spanish war ended.

"The Spaniards welcomed us with such warmth 60 years ago, and today it's no different."

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