

## VARIATIONS ON A THEME OF IRUN



The toughest Nationalists, Requetes and Guardia Civil, close on an outpost of Asturian Miners

The Irun Campaign of late 1936 might be considered the end of the phase of the war in which mobile columns maneuvered about the countryside to seize and hold strategic positions. Several ad hoc formations of Nationalist troops moved into Northern Spain to cut off the Republic from the French border. The actual formations seem to have included rebellious elements of the Peninsular Army, some Carlist Requetes who nominally sought to restore the Spanish Monarchy to conformance with the Salic Law (an issue over which three and half civil wars were fought in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and some elements of the professional Army of Africa.

The forces generally identified as “Republican” were even more varied. The objective of the Nationalist Offensive was the town of Irun on the Northwest Coast of Spain at the French border. The main “Republican” faction in the area was the militia of the separatist Basques. They still set off an occasional bomb in the interests of Basque autonomy. Although the Republic overall was left wing and anti-clerical with an assortment of Anarchist and Communist factions supporting it, the Basque Nationalists were the best Catholics in Spain. They had few machineguns, and while they had solid engineers few were military specialists. There were Andalusian miners who had fought an earlier Republic so vigorously that the Army of Africa had to be called in. They were known, like many of the Anarchists, for playing with dynamite. There were several kinds of Communists. Some, led by the irascible and eccentric Andre Marty, were linked to Stalin’s COMINTERN and snuck over the border from France. Others, including the Partido Obrero Universal Marxiste (POUM) and the Union General Des Trabajores (UGT) had no such connection and were termed “Troskyites” by their more orthodox co-religionists. George Orwell, who served in the POUM militia in Catalonia the following year declared that they were no such thing and that the statement could not be made in countries with effective libel laws.

One “Bandera” stood out. It was the Rosa Luxembourgo Bandera, an all female unit named after the German Communist Martyr Rosa Luxemburg who was killed by the right wing Friekorps in the civil strife which followed German’s defeat in WWI. They seem to have fought well, and taken heavy casualties in the last months of 1936 to the extent that they were virtually eliminated as a combat unit by the beginning of 1937.

In all, however, in spite of the value of the International Bridge to France, and the numerous factions involved on both sides, the total numbers were only a few thousand in this tiny campaign. In the past, I have represented the Nationalists with one Falange, one Requetes, and one converged Guardia Bandera, with a Bandera of the Tercio (Spanish Foreign Legion) and a medium battery as reinforcements. That was somewhat off. And this time I departed from the actual OB even further by adding several Falange elements of various size and withdrawing the Tercio. In all cases I employ a larger number of “Columna” and Basque Battalions arriving throughout the battle.

In this case the “Republicans” began with Andalusian miners defending a fortified villa on the southern part of the field, the Irun militia deployed behind earthworks on the north road, and a relatively well equipped battalion of Basques deployed in the town to “Preserve Order and Public Property.” The reserves were to arrive in “commandeered civilian vehicles” a technical term for stolen cars.

The game is what is sometimes termed “grand tactical,” i.e. one base roughly represents a company, centuria, or “column.” Several bases represent a “columna,” “bandera” or battalion. Vehicles represent enough stolen cars or trucks to mobilize such a force. With luck the local command (Basque) could send the same vehicle(s) off for another columna. But cooperation between Basques, Communists, or Andalusians was touchy at best, though infinitely better than Basques with Anarchists. Planning vacations in Irun were the Ascaso Columna, the Rojo et Negro Columna, and several units of the POUM including the Spartacus Columna. Of course, these units were used not because they were necessarily there, but because I have them on hand.

The “Republican” player had a choice of where to place a few units, and an opportunity to place sections of earthworks. In the event the Irun militia were deployed in a defensive work on the main highway into town parallel to the border. The detachment of Asturian miners occupied a villa to the southeast. And an undisclosed militia force occupied a complex south on the highway to the frontier.



Irun Militia deploys on the north road

The Nationalist’s options were to bring in the five “Bandera” on either or both roads. In the event, the Gardia and Requetes elements were put on the road to a fortified villa to the south. The three Falange units, only one of which had automatic weapons, advanced down the north road towards the Irun militia.

Before starting the action I usually take a few steps to add to the confusion. In the Spanish Civil War there was a great variety of weapons skills which varied somewhat independently of morale and motivation. To represent this I have four categories of weapons skills for rifles. Excellent, moderate, poor, and abysmal. At the same time, abysmal marksmen might have exceptional motivation. Militia elements with little formal training could at best expect to have poor marksmanship skills. George Orwell, who served in the POUM militia reported that he had to teach his colleagues how to clean their rifles. On the other end the Army of Africa contained well trained professionals who could hit targets with rifles at amazing ranges. The “poor” category reflects a basic knowledge of how to point the rifle, and perhaps how to clean the rifle so it doesn’t blow up in their hands. The peninsular army, and later popular army, might be poor or moderate.



I have the players roll a die for each unit. An even die, and the militia are poor marksmen. Odd and they are abysmal. In this case the Falange all rolled abysmal, the Carlists poor, the Guardia were excellent (often time served Army of Africa veterans.) Most of the Republican militia were abysmal. I hoped that the Rosas would roll up-in honor of the girl who beat me out for President\* of the Rifle Club in High School. But no such luck.

Another set of die rolls involved the success of different militia columns in getting control of the stolen vehicles. As luck would have it, the Rojo et Negro Column of Anarchists would be the first reinforcement up the road.

Meanwhile the toughest elements of the Nationalists closed on the outpost. Both bandera has MG companies of medium machine guns. And this proved decisive. After several turns of fire during which the Asturians could do little damage, but the Nationalist MG inflicted the occasional casualty the remnants of the Asturians snuck out the back doors and made for the nearest woods. Another roll to see if the attackers realized that the place had been abandoned. After two turns they made a rush for the abandoned works.



Requetes and Guardia seize the outlying Villa

Meanwhile the Falange elements, which had one MMG detachment between them, began closing in on the Irun outpost and some POUM militia covering the city itself. Both sides, mainly abysmal marksmen, took casualties. But the Falange MMG element gave them an edge over the somewhat larger numbers of Republican militia.



About that time a motor column arrived from San Sebastian with the celebrated Rojo et Negro Columna on board. I gave the Republican player an opportunity to stop when local militia in the path of the fearsome Carlists and Gardia tried to flag them down. Bad roll. On to the center of Irun where they dismounted in the central square by the church. Unfortunately the Anarchists were enthusiastically anti-clerical. Burning churches was one of their fetishes. I allowed the Republican player to roll to see if they would do the sensible thing and get on with the war. But he rolled a one, and off they went to burn the church. Not good! The Basque Nationalists posted in the Church were poor marksmen but had some Lewis guns purchased on the black market from England.

You don't want to try to burn a church occupied by Basques (the best Catholics in Spain) especially if they have automatic weapons!

After an unfortunate religious argument in downtown Irun the Rojo et Negro Columna, less many of its members, ran back to the trucks and set out back down the road for San Sebastian. That particular motor column was ruled unlikely to return to the battle. But others arrived, including another Badera of the Basque Nationalist Army. The density of Basques, not to mention the advance of the Nationalists, persuaded the Espartacus and Acaso Columna to focus on the business at hand. But the Basques were more determined than ever to stay in town. The Anarchists couldn't be trusted even as much as the Nationalists. The Nationalists might kill everyone in sight. But they wouldn't burn churches!





**Columna Rojo et Negro makes for the nearest Church in Irun**



**Nationalists close with the defenders all along the line**

More reinforcements arrived from San Sebastian, and the Carlists met them in the south woods in a close in combat which they won due to their superior fire action and higher morale. The Falange closed on the north road.





Espartacus Column enters the South Woods





The Church garrison, relieved by another Basque Bandera, moves to plug the line.

Not a very decisive end. But enough fighting had been done to rule nightfall and time to replenish what must have been some empty cartridge boxes.

\*My high school rifle club needed club officers to get in the yearbook. The sponsors decided to have the top four marksmen "serve" as President, Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer. As Vice President, I was the only boy to be elected. Which is why I always have a soft spot for the Rosas.