Failure in the Battle of the Ebro led to the definitive collapse of Catalonia. Once the battle had ended and the Republican Army had crossed the river for the last time, the army defending Catalonia began a process of reorganisation under horrific conditions: many units did not have supplies to fight against the imminent Francoist offensive. According to a communiqué sent by Vicente Rojo to the president of the government and minister of war, Juan Negrín, on 6 December 1938, only one hundred thousand of the two hundred and twenty thousand men in the various army units in Catalonia were in any condition to fight.1 The French border, where abundant war supplies sent from the USSR were being warehoused, was closed, and the Republican Army had to look on while Franco received deliveries from Germany, a compensation for mineral concessions made to Hitler.

Under these conditions, rumours spread like wildfire that Franco was preparing a final offensive against Catalonia, although the move was not certain: with the Battle of the Ebro over, Franco was also contemplating other possibilities, like launching a new attack on Madrid or mounting an offensive against Valencia. It appears that the Italian generals and some Spanish ones, conscious that the defeat of Catalonia would hasten the end of the war, were urging Franco to go on the offensive against Catalonia. Mussolini, at the same time, would augment his power in Europe by putting

Italian and German troops in the Pyrenees on the French border. From the Pyrenees to the sea, Franco’s army – still led by Fidel Dávila, who was also Franco’s defence minister – boasted three hundred thousand soldiers: the Urgel Corps under Muñoz Grandes, the Aragon Corps under Moscardó, Gambara’s Italian CTV, the Navarra Corps under Solchaga, the Maestrazgo Corps under García Valiño, and the Moroccan Corps under Yagüe. The army had 565 artillery pieces and around five hundred airplanes.

As he had done on other occasions, Vicente Rojo prepared several Republican offensives on distant fronts in order to gain more time for the reorganisation of the Catalan defences. Motril was to be attacked on 8 December in order to put pressure on Málaga and the area South of Granada and to force Franco to move troops from Extremadura and Andalucía. Franco’s troop movements would be used as part of the Republic’s ‘Plan P’ to attack Córdoba-Peñarroya in the centre. The plan was never carried out, however, due to opposition from General Miaja and Admiral Buiza, and the operation was rapidly suspended, even though ships carrying troops had already embarked for the south. ‘The Battle of Catalonia’, as Rojo complained much later, ‘was lost when the Motril operation was suspended’.

Catalonia was left on its own, defended by an army that was a mere shadow of its former self, while the Republican armies of the centre had been able to reorganise themselves during the brutal Battle of the Ebro. Franco’s army planned to begin the attack on Catalonia on 10 December, but stormy weather postponed the advance for several days. The Republican army, expecting the attack, sent dispatches reporting little movement: on 18 December, for example, the dispatch is limited to pointing out that ‘operational activity on the different fronts lacks any importance’. The next day’s dispatch is even more laconic: ‘All is quiet on the different fronts’.

On 23 December, however, ignoring the proposal coming from the Vatican for a Christmas ceasefire, Franco began his offensive against Catalonia at two points on the front: at Tremp, moving toward Artesa de Segrea and Ponts; and in the south, at Serós, moving toward Sarroca and Mayals. A dispatch from the front on that day describes the following military movements:

Following intense artillery fire and constant action from Italian airplanes, the enemy has initiated an attack on the Catalan fronts. The forces of the invasion attacked the area of Tremp, where they were stopped by Spanish soldiers who inflicted countless casualties.

3. Rojo 1974, p. 84.
4. See La Vanguardia of Tuesday, 20 December 1938, where the dispatches from the two previous days are published.