

History of the 20th Century

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Spain, 1936-39/Hugh Thomas

The Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War ruined the country for a generation, but this was probably its only lasting importance. Why then did so many people feel so passionately about so purely Spanish an affair?

The Spanish Civil War of 1936-39 was the fourth armed conflict fought out on Spanish soil in the 140 years since the beginning of the 19th century, and to a great extent the matters at stake in the 1930's were the same as those in the Carlist wars of the 1830's and the 1870's and in the Peninsular War, namely: the place of the Roman Catholic Church in society; the relation between the central province of Castile and the economically more advanced outlying regions of Catalonia and the Basque provinces; and the relation between classes. In the 20th century these old quarrels were exacerbated by the impact of modern technology—exemplified by the fact that the Andalusian upper class attributed the civil war to the telephone—and by the unfortunate coincidence that quarrelling erupted into conflict at an especially nervous moment in the history of Europe, so that other European countries, such as

Great Britain, France, Russia, Germany, Italy, and Portugal became inevitably involved in varying degrees. Consequently although the war itself was a wholly Spanish affair in origin, it became an international crisis whose 'solution' was decided by external considerations.

The war began with a military conspiracy against the liberal government. A number of prominent right-wing officers, including most of those who had done well in the Moroccan wars of the 1920's, believed that the new, parliamentarily weak government of the Centre was only one step away from surrendering to just such a revolution as had occurred in Russia twenty years earlier. Most of the political Right and the

Silhouetted against the sky, half-crouching Republican troops advance into battle—taken by Robert Capa, generally considered to be one of the greatest war photographers



old master classes of Spain generally were mesmerized by fear of another 'Russia'. They had for a time collaborated with the democratic Spanish Republic after the abdication of King Alfonso XIII in 1931 but now, with continuous verbal intransigence on the Left and much disorder in the streets, they believed that the Republican system of liberalism was doomed. Tacitly or actively the military conspiracy had the support of most of the Spanish middle-class, and of the Church. It was also supported by a small but growing semi-fascist party, the Falange, and the Carlist movement, a 19th-century survival which had re-established firm roots in parts of the rural north of Spain (particularly Navarre) during recent anti-clerical legislation.

On the other side, the liberal government was well intentioned and had much enlightened legislation to its credit in the early thirties. But its members were pitifully ignorant of economic management, often substituting rhetoric for policy. Furthermore, they were hemmed in on the Left by a large if divided Socialist Party

(one branch of whose leadership, weary of democratic compromises and frustrations was heading Leftwards) and by an immense if amorphous and anarchic-syndicalist labour movement which had poured scorn on, and had done its best to sabotage, democratic reform. They also had to contend with a Communist Party which, like the Falange on the Right, was small but increasing in numbers. The anarcho-syndicalists had no truck with the government of the liberals as they had had no truck with that of the King or the democratic Right. The Socialists and the Communists on the other hand nominally supported the government with whom indeed they had fought the previous general election. But they were not represented in the government.

The military conspiracy went off at half-cock. Spanish Morocco, the Canaries, Majorca, the north-west of Spain, Navarre, and large tracts of Old Castile and Aragón were quickly won by the rebels. But in the large cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, and Bilbao and most of the prosperous east, south, and the centre of the country, the

rebels were quickly defeated by the government acting in conjunction with, or in many places displaced by, the working-class organizations.

Orgy of killings

On both sides there then followed a ferocious purge. On the Right the army systematically sought to root out all possible government sympathizers, including on occasions even those who had simply voted for the Left in the preceding election. Many were arbitrarily shot, many more imprisoned for long periods. (Due to the unavailability of police or other records, it is impossible to make an accurate estimate of the numbers so killed, but the figure must have approached 50,000.) On the Left, the removal in many cities of the police and the army, who were compromised by the rebellion, permitted an unofficial but no less bloody persecution, sponsored by anarchists, or sections of the Communist and Socialist Parties. There were also as usual in such circumstances a very large number of outright criminals

Magnum Photo: Robert Capa





who seized on the occasion to settle old scores. In these massacres, the Church suffered particularly severely, many churches being burned and upwards of 6,000 priests, nuns, and monks being killed, including twelve bishops: in Barbastro province, Aragón, no less than eighty per cent of the priests died. Many of these killings were officially denounced by the government but they continued for weeks. Once again, it is hard to determine accurately the number of those who died, but they probably exceeded those killed behind the lines on the Right.

While political life more or less came to an end in the areas under military control, commerce and the economy being increasingly subordinated to the army, the government for a time lost control of the situation in the areas where the rising had been crushed. Here the working class organizations not only proceeded to wreak vengeance on their enemies but sought to carry out a full-blooded revolution. The government was thus powerless to act while the anarchists took over key industries in Barcelona, formed collectives on most large estates (sometimes in collaboration with the local Socialists) and organized militia units to fight the rebels. Within weeks of the outbreak of the rebellion, both Catalonia and the Basque provinces had achieved autonomous regimes by their own declaration. Gradually however the coming of actual civil war forced an end to all such experimentation. Backed by the right wings of the Socialists and Communists in an uneasy and ephemeral alliance, the government began to resume command. The Socialist Largo Caballero became Prime Minister and the Communists entered the coalition cabinet, being later joined by representatives of anarchists, who were themselves prepared (unlike many of their followers) to postpone discussion of the exact nature of the social revolution to be enacted in Spain until after the end of the Civil War, and to support the Communists in their effort to organize a strong but conventional army out of the disorganized militias. Meantime the anarchists' insistence on collectivization antagonized many peasants and small shopkeepers who turned towards the one party prepared to defend them, namely the Communists, whose strength accordingly grew pheno-

menally, being afterwards also joined by many Socialists disgusted by the divisions and arguments in their own party and by nearly the whole of the Socialist youth movement.

Help from Hitler

By this time straight-forward military questions were becoming paramount. To begin with the rebels had seemed certain to lose the war since they had failed in the capital, in the largest industrial centres, and two thirds of the population. Some of the cities where they had gained immediate victory such as Toledo, Seville, Granada, or Córdoba were isolated redoubts surrounded by a revolutionary countryside. The government had also won over many senior army officers and most of the admittedly small air force, and, after a revolution in the fleet, most of the rebel naval officers had been murdered. The rebellion, it seemed, was ill-starred. Its nominal leader, General Sanjurjo, had been killed in an air crash, most of the leaders of the Falange (including its chief, José Antonio Primo de Rivera) were in prison or had been shot, while the outstanding right-wing politician of the pre-war days, Calvo Sotelo, had been murdered a few days before the outbreak of open war. Nevertheless, General Mola, the leader of the military conspiracy, refused a telephoned offer of a compromise with the government and despatched a motley army, half conscripts, and half Carlist or Falangist volunteers, south from Burgos to Madrid. This force was held at the summit of the Guadarrama mountains by government militias. But another force despatched by Mola did capture the summer resort of San Sebastián and thereby cut off the Basques from contact with relatively friendly France; while in the south General Franco, who had taken over command of the native troops and the Foreign Legion in Morocco, successfully transported a number of these crack units across the straits of Gibraltar, thereby turning the tide in Andalusia, relieving within a matter of weeks all the main rebel outposts there. He then despatched this so-called Army of Africa north to Badajoz and thence along the Tagus valley first to Toledo (relieved after a siege) and then to Madrid.

These events had not occurred, however, without the beginning of foreign intervention. While there was no explicit agreement on either side for military assistance from any foreign power before the war began, requests were quickly made by the generals for help from Mussolini, Hitler, and the Prime Minister of Portugal, Oliveira Salazar. At the same time the government urgently appealed for military material from France with whom they had an agreement to buy arms. Hitler sent a military mission and a number of transport aircraft which

Top left: General Francisco Franco, rebel leader and victor in the Spanish Civil War. He was determined to achieve complete military victory. Centre Left: Largo Caballero, Socialist Prime Minister. He refused to take office unless Communists joined the government. Left: Negrín, Caballero's successor as Prime Minister. He saw Spain's salvation in close cooperation with the USSR

HEAD LINES DIVISION

were of use in getting the Army of Africa across the Straits; Mussolini sent fighters, and Salazar agreed to provide every facility that the rebels needed—a great help in the early days. But France, worried by the possibility of involvement in a foreign adventure where she suspected that she could not count on the backing of Great Britain, was more circumspect. Further, the French government depended for its survival on the support of the Radical Party who were actively hostile to giving any help to the Spanish government. In consequence, France proposed an international scheme whereby all the European countries would undertake not to sell arms to Spain and to punish any of their nationals detected in so doing. Great Britain supported this scheme strongly and together with France persuaded all the European powers to accept it. A committee was set up in London to try and administer this interesting experiment in international control.

A testing ground

The trouble with this plan, however, was that from the beginning neither Germany nor Italy had any intention of adhering to it. This was particularly true of Germany who had quickly discovered that Spanish minerals might, if successfully negotiated for, be of great importance in her own war preparations. Göring was also interested in providing a place for testing his 'young Luftwaffe' and other new elements of the German armed services. In consequence there was a regular flow of war material to the rebels from German ports for over two years, accompanied by a small number of military technicians, pilots, and tank crews. On several occasions these forces played critical parts. Mussolini also did his best, making up in quantity what he could not provide in quality. At one point there were 50,000 Italian servicemen in Spain—his motive for intervention being partly a strategic desire to present France with a further hostile frontier. He got no real advantage from the war, unlike the Germans, but it satisfied his ego to see Italy waving a big stick in the world again.

These developments soon became known though France, having earlier allowed a number of aircraft to proceed to Spain under André Malraux, the novelist and future minister of culture, pressed on with Great Britain in a desperate attempt to shore up non-intervention. 'Better a leaky dam than no dam at all' was the view of Anthony Eden, the British foreign minister, expressing the great hostility of British politicians to anything which might risk an expansion of the conflict (or of any conflict) and therefore increase the danger of a more general war. But no such comfortable formula was possible, for Russia was being pressed strongly by the world Com-

munist parties to help Spain. Apparently against his better judgment Stalin did decide to send both men and material to help the government, for fear of being internationally outflanked on the Left by the Trotskyists who clamoured for intervention. The Communists also successfully organized the International Brigades of volunteers, not all of them being Communists, to fight alongside the government militias; and they acquitted themselves with great valour in several fierce battles. Hence the Spanish Civil War became more and more a European civil war fought out on Spanish soil: in one battle, Guadalajara, for instance left-wing Italian volunteers successfully turned back a regular Italian army force sent by Mussolini while German fought German in the environs of Madrid. In these circumstances the Non-Intervention Committee in London dithered on, listening to counter-charge and counter-charge by the German, Italian, and Russian representatives—all of whom lied.

General Franco's army had meanwhile reached the gates of Madrid. By means of a political manoeuvre scarcely less than a coup d'état, he had become head of state and head of the government of Nationalist Spain. As such he was recognized as the government of Spain by his German and Italian allies. All observers supposed that Madrid would soon fall, either to the four columns advancing on the city or by the action of a 'fifth column' of sympathizers within the city. It did not do so, due to the effective mobilization of the population of the capital, and to the last minute arrival of Russian aircraft, tanks, and advisers and the International Brigades. There were a series of indecisive battles around Madrid (Jarama, Guadalajara) from which General Franco gained ground but not the capital. In March he called off the offensive and turned to the north of Spain.

The campaign in the north occupied most of the rest of 1937. The Basque provinces and Asturias were finally reduced, providing Franco with rich mineral resources with which to bargain with Germany for arms supplies. Republican offensives at Brunete (near Madrid) and in Aragón ground to a halt. Despite the Republican control of much of the fleet, Franco's possession of the northern provinces, and his ability to rely on the German and Italian navies gave him effective control of the sea, permitting aid from abroad to arrive effortlessly. The situation was different on the Republican side, where Russian aid had to traverse the difficult sea route through the Mediterranean, often meeting the attacks of disavowed Italian submarines. Some material was smuggled through from France but in keeping with the Non-Intervention Agreement she kept her southern frontier closed

to the passage of arms for long periods. Short of food as well as of arms, it seemed only a matter of time before the government forces would collapse. There had also been continued difficulties behind the lines: fighting had broken out between Communists and anarchists in May; the Communists had carried out a purge of the revolutionary anti-Russian Communist Party the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista; and the Prime Minister, Largo Caballero, had been supplanted by the more moderate Dr Negrín, who was prepared to face the reality that the British and French boycott left him with no option but to remain on terms with Russia. Communist tactics in the army and in agriculture were depressing morale, while the anarchist dream of immediate social revolution was inevitably stemmed by the need to harness industry and commerce to war. Even autonomous Catalonia was largely overcome by a centralizing government determined to sacrifice all to the priority of winning or at least sustaining the conflict. By this time, there were in effect two strong nation states at war rather than two Spanish parties. The difference between them was that while the government or the Left would perhaps have from 1937 onwards accepted some form of compromise peace, General Franco was determined on achieving nothing short of military victory. And in truth the only likely alternative to such a victory was an arbitrary dividing line, resulting in the quasi-permanent establishment of two Spains, on the model of the later divisions of Korea and Germany.

Russian aid dwindles

The war dragged on throughout 1938 and into 1939. Two big government offensives at Teruel and on the Ebro river gained ground for a time but were ultimately repelled at great cost, Franco being enabled to cut the government territory in two by May 1938. In December 1939 Franco launched a major campaign against the government redoubt in Catalonia. By this time, partly thanks to the international situation after Munich, partly because of the greater difficulties of ensuring safe passage, Russian aid to the government had become a trickle. Normal commerce with government ports had declined because of Franco's blockade and because of air attacks on shipping. The food situation was bad. It had become evident to all, including the German government, that Great Britain (and in her train France) would never risk a general war over Spain, and particularly not over any breach of the Non-Intervention Agreement. Doubtless Great Britain should have taken a firm line and stated explicitly that continued German and Italian evasions of the agreement were making a mockery of all con-

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cerned; that therefore Great Britain would enable the Republic to buy arms freely on a commercial basis; and that further interference with British and other shipping on the high sea would not be brooked. Germany might then have backed down. But no such robustness was forthcoming. The consequences were that by the winter of 1938-39 with Barcelona and Catalonia threatened, the only real hope for the Republicans was the possibility of the outbreak of a general European war, over Czechoslovakia or Poland, in the course of which German aid to General Franco might have been expected to drop and perhaps a French or British expeditionary force, echoing the War of the Spanish Succession or the Napoleonic Wars, might have reappeared in Spain.

This, however, was not to be. Franco smashed Catalonia without a fight, and thousands of government troops were permitted to withdraw into France, along with the government itself. Dr Negrin flew back to the centre of Spain in February and began an investigation as to the possibility of continued resistance in the far from inconsiderable area, including the capital, left to his followers. Both he and the Communists supported, at least in their declarations, the aims of resistance to the bitter end, though some doubt must exist as to their real intentions since their preparations for such a heroic stand were not impressive. But this defiant declaration created such alarm that a conspiracy among many disgruntled liberals, anarchists, and members of the Socialist Party took shape within the government. They wrongly believed Negrin to be the tool of the Communist Party and feared that his intransigence coupled with that of the Communists was preventing the achievement of a compromise peace. In early March 1939, Colonel Casado rose against Negrin and the Communists in Madrid. There was much fighting. A civil war within the Civil War was thus the humiliating culmination of so many months of sacrifice and endeavour. The Communists who had all along dominated the government army won the day in Madrid but in the rest of Spain widespread dissatisfaction with Negrin came to the surface and there was a mutiny in the fleet and a Falangist rising in Cartagena. Negrin and the leading Communists thereupon fled abroad, leaving Casado in control. Having shot his leading Communist opponents in the capital, Casado then turned to try and negotiate with Franco. But as Negrin could have told him Franco had no intention of effecting any compromise. Nor had he any need to do so. By that time Great Britain and France as well as Germany and Italy were ready to recognize him as the government of Spain. He had enough armaments from abroad

to be able to contemplate a new offensive against Madrid without fear of resistance. Even while negotiations between himself and Casado were being fruitlessly pursued, the government armies began to melt away. In the end Casado, accompanied by such as could, made their escape from Spain by sea, and handed over Madrid without a fight. By 1st April 1939 rebel armies were in control in all the main cities of Spain. Some semi-guerrilla war went on for months in the Cantabrian mountains, but troubled no one.

Victory, hunger, and misery

The main reasons for General Franco's victory were threefold: first he successfully galvanized the forces of the Right in Spain into accepting him as *Caudillo* (leader), and rallied behind him all the surviving right-wing politicians and groups. The Church with few exceptions (mostly in the ultra-religious Basque provinces, where most priests were Basque nationalists) rallied behind the rebels from the start of the war, being naturally horrified by the widespread massacres of their Republican counterparts and by the permanent closure of all churches save in the Basque area. The fascists of the Falange might perhaps have disputed Franco's leadership had more of their leaders survived the holocaust of the first days. But José Antonio Primo de Rivera, by far the most brilliant of them, was misguidedly shot after trial in a government gaol: as were, in even less edifying circumstances, most of his more able followers. This left a worthy but politically inexperienced Falangist from Santander, Manuel Hedilla, as the only possible rival to Franco. But he was gaoled by Franco after the latter had staged a merger of all the rebel parties, Carlists as well as Falangists, in a new movement with an ideology of almost insulting simplicity. In this the few surviving old Falangists were swamped by new recruits. This party never became a true fascist party, since it was always subservient to the Church and it never developed a semi-military organization. Much of the rebels' propaganda with its appeals to a heroic past, its stress on leadership, and insistence on a Spain untouched by 'internationalism' such as Jewry or liberalism or freemasonry was fascist in tone, but it scarcely went deeper than a justification for the persecution of freemasons and liberals.

On the other side, after the first hectic days of July 1936 there was never much trust between the different parties which made up the government coalition; neither Largo Caballero nor Negrin succeeded in establishing himself as the unquestioned national leader—though to be fair none of their possible rivals could have done any better. There was the paradox that the

evident wisdom of the Communists' political proposals—a delay in the social revolution—was counterbalanced by their intolerance and cruelty towards opponents in a weaker position.

The second reason for Franco's victory was that since the war was fought in conventional terms, the generals had a slight edge over their opponents even though the People's Army on the government side was a remarkable achievement of swift organization. No serious effort was made to articulate anarchist discontent with a regular army structure into guerrilla activity on a large scale.

Finally, Franco received more regular and more substantial aid from Germany and Italy than the government did from Russia or from the international arms trade. This international assistance covered strategic goods as well as arms: government excesses in the first days of the Civil War antagonized international finance, and enabled Franco to receive credits from abroad, in particular from the Texas Oil Company which gambled on a rebel victory from the outset. The widespread sympathy which the government's cause excited on the Left in Europe and North America did, however, counterbalance this help.

The war was followed by a bloody proscriptio, when large numbers of government sympathizers were imprisoned and shot. The outbreak of the Second World War in September prevented any international finance being available for reconstruction in Spain and the succeeding years were therefore a time of hunger and misery.

Top right: Spanish peasant woman surveys one of the war's many victims. The number of deaths in the Civil War is customarily held to be one million. The figure suits both victors and vanquished. The former can argue that they saved Spain from atheism and Communism at a cost of a million dead. The latter can allege that Franco climbed to power over a million corpses. It is more likely, however, that the total number of violent deaths in the Civil War was just over 400,000. Deaths from malnutrition, starvation, or disease directly attributable to the war may have amounted to over 100,000. Top far right: Last stand in Irún, September 1936. Taking the place of a dead comrade, a Republican sniper maintains fire on advancing rebels from a ruined farmhouse. Right: Welcome assistance for an elderly refugee. Terrified refugees were a frequent and harrowing sight all over Spain; thousands poured over the Pyrenees into France as the Nationalist armies established their hold over the country.