

## CIVIL WAR CASE STUDY 1: THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR (1936–39)



General Francisco Franco, the leader who took Nationalist forces to victory in the Spanish Civil War.

*'A civil war is not a war but a sickness,' wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. 'The enemy is within. One fights almost against oneself.' Yet Spain's tragedy in 1936 was even greater. It had become enmeshed in the international civil war, which started in earnest with the Bolshevik revolution.*

From Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936–1939*, 2006

The Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936 after more than a century of social, economic and political division. Half a million people died in this conflict between 1936 and 1939.

As you read through this chapter, consider the following essay questions:

- Why did a civil war break out in Spain in 1936?
- How significant was the impact of foreign involvement on the outcome of the Spanish Civil War?
- What were the key effects of the Spanish Civil War?

### Timeline of events – 1820–1931

1820	The Spanish Army, supported by liberals, overthrows the absolute monarchy and makes Spain a <b>constitutional monarchy</b> in a modernizing revolution
1821	Absolute monarchy is restored to Spain by French forces in an attempt to reinstate the old order
1833	In an attempt to prevent a female succession following the death of King Ferdinand, there is a revolt by 'Carlists'. The army intervenes to defeat the Carlists, who nevertheless remain a strong conservative force in Spanish politics (see Interesting Facts box)
1833–69	The army's influence in national politics increases during the 'rule of the Queens'
1869–70	Anarchist revolts take place against the state
1870–71	The monarchy is overthrown and the First Republic is established
1871	The army restores a constitutional monarchy
1875–1918	During this period the constitutional monarchy allows for democratic elections. The system is corrupt, however. Power remains in the hands of the wealthy oligarchs or 'caciques'
1914–18	Spanish nationalism suffers when Spain is defeated in 1898 in a war with the USA
1918–23	Spain remains neutral during World War I and experiences economic growth. The regime reaches new lows in 1921, when the army, sent to crush a revolt led by Abd-el-Krim in Spanish Morocco, is massacred by Moors
1923–30	General Primo de Rivera takes control in a bloodless coup and rules for seven years, thus fatally undermining the legitimacy of the monarchy
1931	The King abdicates and the Second Republic is established

#### Carlism

Carlism is a political movement in Spain that looks to establish a separate line of the Bourbon family on the Spanish throne. This line is descended from Carlos V (1788–1855).

### STUDENT STUDY SECTION

#### Review questions

Study the timeline above and then read the following quotation.

*The notion that political problems could more naturally be solved by violence than by debate was firmly entrenched in a country in which for a thousand years civil war has been if not exactly the norm then certainly no rarity.*

From Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge*, 2006

- 1 Looking at the timeline above showing events in Spain in the 19th and early 20th centuries, what evidence is there for Preston's argument?
- 2 What factors were causing tensions in Spain during this time? (Economic, military, religious, political?)
- 3 What example of foreign intervention was there in Spain in the 19th century?

### Long-term causes of the Spanish Civil War: political instability (1820–1931)

In the 19th century, Spain had struggled between periods of conservatism and liberalism. As you can see from the timeline above, there were several issues that caused tension and division in Spain in the century before the 1930s, fractures that were to become more acute in the decade before the civil war broke out.

#### Weakness of government

From 1871, Spain had been a constitutional monarchy. The King was head of state, and he appointed a Prime Minister who should have commanded a majority in the parliament (Cortes). Yet although the Cortes was elected by the male population, real power was held by the wealthy oligarchs, and political control shifted between their different cliques. There were two main parties, the Conservatives and the Liberals, but in fact there was no real difference between them. Elections were rigged or decided by corruption. There were no mass democratic political parties:

*the consequence was, at a very superficial level, political stability, but beneath it tremendous social instability, because nothing ever really changed ... Elections changed virtually nothing. Only a relatively small proportion of the electorate had the right to vote, and since nothing changed ... the population was forced into apathy or violent opposition to the system.*

From Paul Preston, *Modern History Review*, September 1991

#### The role of the Spanish Army

The army had a powerful political position in Spain due to its role in Spain's imperial past. It believed that it was the protector of the nation, and that this meant it had the right and duty to intervene in politics if a crisis occurred. It had intervened in this way several times, in 1820, 1871 and 1923. It did not, however, act to save the King in 1931, and this led to his exile. The army intervened again during the Second Republic and lastly in 1936. It was this last intervention that was to lead to civil war.

The army was unpopular with the people. It had a reputation for brutality, it was expensive and required heavy taxes to maintain. The army had also proved ineffective when it lost the Spanish Empire during the 19th century, and lost the war with America in 1898. It had also struggled to keep control of Morocco between 1906 and 1926.

The army was in need of reform. It was too big, and had too many officers. The upper and middle classes, however, defended their interests, as they dominated the officer corps. The army was generally conservative, but the ‘Africanistas’ – those who were experienced in the wars in Morocco – were the most traditional and nationalistic.

### The role of the church

The Catholic Church was rich and powerful in Spain, and there had been disputes between church and state throughout the 19th century. The state had guaranteed the role of the church in education and in elements of the economy, and the church had used its wealth to gain considerable political and social influence. It used its power to support social, political and economic conservatism and was opposed to modernizing and liberal forces. The aristocracy was closely tied to the church; they made up the vast majority of senior clergy, and provided much of the funding for the church. This meant the church was inclined to defend the rights and status of the upper classes, which led to resentment amongst the poor. In many urban areas there were protests against the church, although it was more popular in the rural areas.

### Economic causes

The plight of the agricultural workers was a key factor in the discontent that led to the civil war. Spain was mainly an agricultural economy, and agriculture was the main source of employment. Unfortunately, there were fundamental problems that made it inefficient. It did not provide sufficient food and work was only seasonal. There was the need for workers to migrate in search of work – most lived in abject poverty and the gap between rich and poor was vast. In the centre and south of Spain, land was owned in huge estates, the *latifundia*, by the ‘Grandees’ who dominated the political system. In the north, peasants owned small plots of land, but often these were too small to make an adequate living.

Rioting and disorder often broke out in the countryside. The Civil Guard were deployed to ruthlessly repress any disorder. With no support from the church, some looked to groups such as the **anarchists**, who argued for the redistribution of land. Yet many of the Catholic small landholders were very conservative and resistant to socialist or anarchist ideas. The conservatism was exploited by the Catholic Agrarian Federation, which provided support for farmers in return for their rejection of socialist ideas; these same farmers were later to support Franco and to fight on his side during the war.

Industrially there was also the need for modernization and reform. Apart from in the north, there had been little Spanish industrialization in the 19th century. Expansion was limited by endemic poverty. Workers in the towns, meanwhile, faced low wages, long hours, unregulated working conditions, poor housing and little in the way of welfare provision. This situation led to the growth of trade unionism. But the trade unions competed with each other (for example the CNT and UGT). The unions failed to achieve anything substantial, as the employers could always find alternative labour sources from the countryside. The workers’ political parties had no real political power. With no legal means of improving their situation, violent uprising appealed to many as the means to effect change.

Spain’s neutrality during World War I facilitated a short period of economic boom. With the increase of exports, however, there were also inflation and shortages, working-class living standards went down and working-class militancy increased. By the early 1920s, there were major economic problems, and this led to violent conflict between employers and employees particularly in industrial cities in Catalonia.

#### General Francisco Franco

General Franco was born Francisco Franco Bahamonde. He came from a military background, and had begun his career in the navy. However, as Spain’s empire declined, the navy was cut down in size and Franco joined the army. He became a general after demonstrating sound leadership skills fighting in Morocco. Before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Franco had been stationed on the Spanish mainland and was active in suppressing anarchists and anti-government forces in the early 1930s.

#### The Civil Guard

The Civil Guard was founded in 1844. Its purpose was to control the peasantry, maintain the status quo and stamp out any anti-monarchist, revolutionary sentiment. It was particularly active in the Basque provinces and was hated by the peasantry. It was later to play a role in supporting the conservative landowners in resisting the reforms of the Second Republic.

#### UGT and CNT

The Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT; General Union of Workers) was the socialist-led trade union, and the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT; National Confederation of Labour) was the anarchist trade union.

### The role of the regions

A significant cause of tension was the ongoing struggle between the centralist state and Catalonia and the Basque provinces, which wanted decentralization and independence. The Catalans and the Basques had their own separate languages and cultures, and by the early 20th century they had their own industrialized economies and churches. Primo de Rivera took back the self-governing rights of Catalonia, and these separatist forces supported the Republican movement that overthrew Alfonso in 1931 (see below). (De Rivera was an experienced military official before becoming Prime Minister in 1923. He ruled Spain as a dictator until 1930.)

### Political opposition

There were a number of groups opposed to the political status quo in Spain, and each would play a part in the political divisions that led to violent conflict in 1936. The liberal movement in Spain had achieved little in opposing conservative forces in the 19th century, although they remained a political force and supported the revolution that ousted the King in 1931. The Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE; Spanish Socialist Party) had grown in urban areas in the late 19th century, but had minimal impact, whereas the UGT was more visible in organizing strikes and protests in the urban regions. In addition, following the Bolshevik revolution, a small Communist Party had emerged. The socialists, as with the liberals, played a significant role in the revolution of 1931, but the parties became divided over what reforms should take place. The more moderate socialists were led by Indalecio Prieto, and the radicals were led by Largo Caballero.

The anarchists were also a major political group in Spain; as previously suggested, this was mainly due to their demand for the redistribution of land, which was popular with the peasants. The anarchists argued for revolutionary methods and boycotted all democratic processes. Their trade union was the CNT, which like the UGT was active in organizing strikes and protests. In addition, there was a more extreme anarchist faction called the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI; Spanish Anarchist Federation), which perpetrated bombings and assassinations.

### The fall of the monarchy and the establishment of the Second Republic

King Alfonso XIII (1885–1931) was not a modernizer. The impact of military defeat in Morocco, and the post-World War I Depression, put pressure on the King, and after 12 unsuccessful governments during the period 1918–23 Alfonso did not resist the coup of General Primo de Rivera.

De Rivera tried to establish an authoritarian right-wing regime to redress Spain’s problems, similar to the Italian fascist model. He started various infrastructure programmes for railways, roads and electrification, as well as irrigation schemes. Industrial production developed at three times the rate of output before 1923 and he ended the war in Morocco in 1925. Nevertheless, he ran up massive debts that put Spain into a dreadful situation when the Wall Street Crash came. He managed to alienate most of the powerful elements of society, including the landowners and the army. Thus De Rivera resigned in 1930, having not resolved Spain’s economic problems, or brought about long-term political stability. It seemed that dictatorship as a solution to Spain’s problems had failed. After municipal elections in April showed support for the San Sebastián Pact coalition of parties (republicans, liberals, socialists and Catalans), the King went into voluntary exile. This time neither the church nor the army intervened to save the King – there seemed nothing they could put in his place. A ‘velvet revolution’ had occurred and the Second Republic was established.

## STUDENT STUDY SECTION

## Review questions

- 1 Draw a mind map or spider diagram of the key issues dividing Spain by 1931.
- 2 Explain the events that led to the fall of King Alfonso in 1931.
- 3 Looking at the long-term issues in Spain and the political events of the 19th century, what problems was the Second Republic likely to face? Do you consider that war was inevitable by mid 1931?

## Short-term causes of the Spanish Civil War: political polarization

## Timeline of events – 1931–36

- 1931 **Apr** Second Spanish Republic proclaimed  
 1933 **Nov** Spanish right wins general election  
 1934 **Oct** Asturias rising  
 1936 **Feb** Popular Front government elected  
**July** Army rising

## STUDENT STUDY SECTION

## Picture analysis

A symbolic representation of the Second Republic.



## Question

What image is given here of the Second Republic? (Look carefully at all the symbolism in the painting.)

Between 1931 and 1936, Spain became politically polarized. You may have already decided in your answers to the review question 3 on p.230 that civil war in Spain was very likely given the long-term structural problems and clear divisions that already existed in the 19th century. Nevertheless, it is important to note the following: '...in 1931 when the Second Republic was established, no-one, except a tiny minority on the lunatic fringe on the extreme right or left, believed that Spain's problems could be solved only by war' (Paul Preston, *Modern History Review*, September 1991). The events of the Second Republic were thus central in bringing about a situation, only five years later, in which large numbers of people thought war was inevitable, if not desirable.

## The Left Republic (April 1931–November 1933)

In the elections that followed Alfonso's departure, the centre-left won with the objective of modernizing Spain. The government declared a new constitution, stating that Spain was a 'democratic republic of workers of all classes'. Manuel Azaña became the President and leading figure in the new regime. However, the key issues causing tension in Spain before the 'velvet revolution' of 1931 continued to dominate the political, economic and social atmosphere under the new left-wing government.

Azaña addressed the issue of the church's power. His speeches were anticlerical, and an attempt was made to separate the church and state, and to limit church powers. The church was no longer in control of education, and the state payment of the clergy was to be stopped gradually over a two-year period. The power of the army was also attacked; the government attempted to reduce numbers by offering early retirement on full pay, an offer taken up by 50 per cent of officers. The military academy of Saragossa was closed (Franco had been its director). Yet this policy backfired to a certain extent, as not only was it expensive for the government, but it meant that the army was radicalized; those who remained in the army were the conservative and nationalist core, including the Africanistas.

The desperate economic problems that existed in Spain had been exacerbated by the Depression: agricultural prices were tumbling, wine and olive exports fell and land had gone out of cultivation. Peasant unemployment was rising. The effects were also being felt industrially; iron production fell by one-third and steel by almost one-half. Largo Caballero was Minister of Labour, and he initiated an extensive land redistribution programme, with compensation for landowners. In 1932, a law enabled the state to take over estates and to redistribute land to the peasants. Yet the government did not have the money for this change, and fewer than 7,000 families had benefited from the programme by 1933. The right saw this as a major threat to its interests, and an attempt to copy the Soviet system.

Civil unrest and violence continued under the Left Republic, and it dealt with its perpetrators brutally. The government introduced the Assault Guard in an attempt to produce a more left-wing military force. There were risings by both the right (General José Sanjurjo in 1932) against the reforms, and by the left (a good example was the Casas Viejas anarchist rising in 1933 – see below) against the slow pace of change. At this time, the risings were suppressed, as the majority of the army remained loyal.

As for the regional issues, Catalonia was given its own parliament, and some powers including law and order and dual control over education. Right-wing groups were angered by this change, as they saw it as a move towards independence for the regions and the break-up of Spain.

Each reform was perceived as an attack on one or more right-wing groups, i.e. the church, army, landowners or industrialists. A new right-wing party, the Confederación Española de

President Manuel Azaña.



Derechas Autónomas (CEDA; Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right), was formed to defend church and landlords. CEDA was led by José María Gil-Robles and was modelled on the German Nazi Party. Indeed, the political divisions within Spain seemed to increase under the Second Republic. The right wing opposed the reforms, sometimes with violence.

Although some historians see the failure of land reform as central to the failure of the government during this period, historian Paul Preston has argued that the right wing was in any case never going to give the regime a chance. Azaña also did himself a disservice when in January 1933 government guards set fire to houses in the village of Casas Viejas near Cadiz in an attempt to 'smoke out' a group of anarchists. Twenty-five people were killed. This incident lost the left-wing Republic a lot of working-class support, and led even the socialists to withdraw support from Azaña, who resigned in 1933.

#### STUDENT STUDY SECTION

##### Review question

How did the actions of the Second Republic create more tension? In what way did they, in Paul Preston's words, 'ensure that Spain's underlying conflicts were transmitted into national politics'?

#### The destabilization of the Spanish electoral system

It is worth noting that the Spanish electoral system ensured that only a small swing in the number of votes cast had a huge effect on the parliamentary system. Thus, although there was only a minor shift of votes from the left to the right, there was a big change in parliamentary power. The same was to happen in 1936 when the Popular Front gained control. The instability created by the electoral system was a contributory factor to the breakdown of the Second Republic.

#### Prieto

Prieto, whose full name was Indalecio Prieto Tuero, was one of the leading figures of the Socialist Workers' Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE) in Spain. He was a prominent critic of de Rivera's government, and was appointed finance minister in Zamora's government in 1931.

### The Right Republic (November 1933–February 1936)

In the elections of 1933, the Republic swung to the right, with the right-wing and centrist parties benefiting from the disunity of the left. Although CEDA was the largest party, the President resisted giving Gil-Robles power. However, CEDA forced the government's hand in October 1934 by withdrawing support. Gil-Robles was made War Minister and two other CEDA party members were given cabinet posts.

The new government ruled for two years in what became known as the black years, because they embarked on systematically reversing the Left Republic's reforms. Church control was restored over education and the clergy were again to be paid by the state. Azaña's key economic reform – the land programme – was halted. Catalonia attempted to resist interference, and declared itself independent after CEDA joined the government. Its autonomy was suspended after the Asturian miners' uprising in 1934. This rebellion was put down by troops, including Moroccan forces. Threats from the left of a 'general strike' increased. Historians have argued that the violent suppression of this uprising increased the likelihood of a civil war in Spain. In addition, the right lost the support of the Basques, who now backed the left wing. Violence was widespread.

#### STUDENT STUDY SECTION

##### Research activity

Research the Asturian miners' uprising of 1934. In pairs, discuss the extent to which you agree that this was an 'attempted revolution'.

The political response to the Right Republic was divided. Caballero was more extreme in his speeches than the more moderate Prieto. He suggested that CEDA was the Spanish Nazi party and that the left should seek a Soviet-style solution for Spain. Thus, he articulated the parallels in Spanish politics to the broader European political landscape.

In response, Gil-Robles demanded a shift to a more authoritarian approach to control the communists in Spain. This response led to more cooperation between the left's factions: socialists, anarchists, syndicalists and now communists. Indeed, Prieto attempted to find some common ground between the left and centre groups to enable them to take on the right wing.

### The Popular Front (February–July 1936)

The right wing disintegrated as the economic and the political situation deteriorated, and in the elections of February 1936, the 'Popular Front', which was an anti-fascist pact made up of various left-wing groups including the socialists and the communists, was victorious. However, here was the same policy that was being advocated by Stalin in his 'Popular Front' policy from 1935. Thus, the Popular Front was for many in Spain a final attempt to uphold democracy and peace, but others associated it with Stalin and the more extreme communist supporters.

The manifesto promoted by President Azaña, now returned to power, was liberal and not radical. Nevertheless, the government wanted to restore the reforms of the 1931–33 regime, and political prisoners were released. But there was still no political consensus; Caballero's socialists did not join the government and the right would not accept the restoration of reforms.

The anarchists encouraged peasants to seize land, which led to an increase in violence in the countryside. They also openly recruited for their militias and organized bombings and assassinations. Open conflict between the anarchist FAI and fascist CEDA and Falange youth movements increased. The government again faced increasing disorder. In May, the CNT called a general strike, and there were several strikes throughout June. The right wing believed that Spain was in the early throes of a left-wing revolution.

### Immediate causes of the Spanish Civil War

The victory of the left in the 1936 elections threw the right-wing CEDA into turmoil. Gil-Robles began to use his funds to support military plans for a coup. In fact, military officers began planning for a coup as soon as the Popular Front gained power. An extreme nationalist group of junior officers joined with the senior Africanista officers, including Mola and Franco. The catalyst for the coup was the murder of a popular CEDA leader on 13 July 1936.

Azaña knew that there were plans for a coup, and attempted to prevent it by moving key military figures to remote posts. However, they had already made their plans and set a date for the coup – 18 July 1936. The conspirators made contact with the fascist Falange and the monarchist 'Carlist' group. Spain was clearly polarized between groups inspired by the Soviets, who feared the fascists, and the right, which was inspired by Hitler and Mussolini and feared the communists.

When the details of the coup were discovered, the coup was initiated earlier, on 17 July, from Morocco. It spread to the mainland, and was successful in taking northern Spain and parts of Andalusia. Yet the rising failed in the main industrial areas, and the rebels did not take Madrid. Half the army had remained loyal to the Republic. Thus the coup overall was unsuccessful, and, had it remained a Spanish affair, it is quite possible that the Republicans would have won.

#### STUDENT STUDY SECTION

##### Review questions

- 1 To what extent did economic issues lead to a civil war?
- 2 What was the impact of international events on the growing divisions in Spain?

##### Class debate

Divide the class into three groups. Each group needs to argue one of the following:

- The right wing was responsible for the Spanish Civil War
- The left wing was responsible for the Spanish Civil War
- Both left and right were equally responsible for the Spanish Civil War

#### Falange

Falange (Phalanx) was founded by Primo de Rivera, the son of the former dictator, in 1933. By early 1936, it had 8,000 members (mainly students). They had a 'blue shirted uniform'. The Falange demanded a strong authoritarian leadership, but was also committed to radical social change.