

Did the Franco dictatorship emerge more from long-term internal Spanish conflicts, or as part of a 'European Civil War'?

Benjamin Eskola

2 April 2014

The Spanish Civil War occurred during a period of deep political and economic crisis in Europe and in the wider world. Since the Great War, a socialist government had become established in Russia; socialist revolutions had occurred in Germany, Hungary, Italy, and beyond, along with non-socialist revolutions such as the Irish War of Independence; the Wall Street Crash of October 1929 had caused long-lasting and international economic damage; and the rise of far-right governments in Germany, Italy, and Portugal, and far-right parties across much of Europe, including Britain. The outbreak of civil war in Spain in July 1936 was seen by many on the left wing of politics as the 'latest battleground' in a 'world war in embryo', and an opportunity to 'defend democracy with deeds'.¹ During the war itself, foreign involvement on both sides played a significant role, despite an official policy of neutrality on the part of many western powers. Undoubtedly, the war cannot be looked at in isolation from events in Europe and worldwide; however, were these events more significant than the internal conflicts that had already sparked a series of civil wars during the 19th century and led to the establishment of the Second Republic in 1931?

The economic situation in Spain in the 1930s can be traced back to the Middle Ages and the Reconquista. The need for money to fund the war against the Moors led to the conversion of Spain's large tracts of arable land (the 'granary of the Roman Empire') into pastures to provide wool for trade. This especially in the areas being seized in the south, for example in Andalusía. The land was often given as gifts to the nobility in return for their

¹Richard Baxell, *Unlikely Warriors: The British in the Spanish Civil War and the Struggle Against Fascism* (Aurum Press, 2012).

support, which in turn led to the conversion from small privately-owned parcels of land that had been common in the Islamic period, into massive tracts known as *latifundios*, worked by peasant farmers.² This system persisted until the 19th and 20th centuries, and was a significant concern for the reformist left-wing governments of the Second Republic, as well as providing fuel for the socialist and anarchist movements of the period.

Political tensions had racked Spain all throughout the 19th century; the conflict of the 1930s was the fourth civil war since the Napoleonic Wars.³ Progressive and reactionary factions had repeatedly come into conflict, culminating in the Third Carlist War in the early 1870s and the establishment and collapse of the First Republic. Over the course of the 19th century the liberal reforms that had spread across Europe had mostly been resisted in Spain, and although Spain's middle-class revolution in 1808-14 was decades in advance of most of Europe,⁴ its reforms were soon reversed by the anti-liberal King Fernando VII.

A significant political factor in the war were the socialist and anarchist factions. These had strong presences not only in the industrial north (Catalunya, Asturias, the Basque Country), but also in regions like Andalusía, where disaffected labourers were drawn to the anarchist philosophy. Anarchists, in particular, were implicated in a number of smaller uprisings in the decades before the civil war, for example the Jerez insurrection in 1892, or the 'tragic week' (*Setmana Tràgica*) in Barcelona in 1909; these continued up into the period of the Second Republic, notably the Asturian miners' strike of 1934, organised by the socialist trade union UGT. (Of relevance also is the fact that anarchist groups like the CNT union and the FAI were philosophically opposed even to the liberal democracy of the Second Republic; support for this was only ever grudgingly granted, as the lesser of two evils when compared with a fascist dictatorship.)

The political situation outside Spain is also of relevance; firstly because Spain was not uninfluenced by events like the Great War (despite its neutrality) and the Wall Street Crash, and secondly because such events contributed both to the intervention and the non-intervention of the various foreign powers, and foreign nationals, during the Civil War itself. The Great War proved to be of some economic benefit, as Spain's neutrality allowed it to export agricultural produce, industrial goods, and raw materials;

² Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain* (Orion Books, 2007), chap. 1.

³ Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1990), chap. 2.

⁴ Beevor, chap. 1.

however, this lasted only until the end of the war.⁵

Similarly, the effects of the Wall Street Crash were felt in Spain as elsewhere; particularly in the climate of uncertainty that followed it. The initial effect was a decline in exports of up to 50 percent. The secondary effect was a wave of civil unrest, across Europe, contributing to an authoritarian shift in a number of governments. This unrest, and the concomitant uncertainty in the financial sector, led to the cancelling of a sixty-million-dollar loan by an American bank upon the proclamation of the Republic.⁶

The economic and political conditions also went some way to encouraging foreign volunteers. Most famous were the Communist-backed International Brigades, with 32,000–35,000 combatant volunteers and around 10,000 non-combatants. A smaller number (3,000–5,000) joined other units, chiefly the militias of the POUM and CNT.⁷ The largest proportion of the volunteers (around a quarter) came from France; others came from Germany, Italy, the USA, and Great Britain. Their participation was inspired occasionally by a desire for adventure and a lack of opportunities in their home countries, but more often to left-wing political inclinations and a desire to stop the spread of fascism.⁸ In particular, it has been estimated that between 3,000 and 10,000 of the volunteers were Jewish.⁹ Around three quarters of the British volunteers were members of the Communist Party; others (like George Orwell) were affiliated with the Independent Labour Party.

The official policy of the western powers towards the war in Spain was one of neutrality; however, in many cases this neutrality equated to tacit support for the rebels. In public, for example, the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, stated that “that [Britain] will join no anti-Communist and no anti-Fascist bloc ... We offer co-operation to all, but we will accept dictation from none”.¹⁰ However, in the same debate, the policy of non-intervention was described as a “farce”, due to the failure of Germany and Italy to re-

⁵Beevor, chap. 1.

⁶Beevor, chap. 3.

⁷Beevor, chap. 16; Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (Eyre & Spottiswood, 1961), appx. 3.

⁸Baxell, chap. 12.

⁹Thomas; Martin Sugarman, ‘Against Fascism: Jews Who Served in the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War’, *Jewish Virtual Library*, 2016 <<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/History/spanjews.pdf>>.

¹⁰Hansard, ‘House of Commons Debate on the Address’, 1 November 1937 <<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1937-11-01/debates/dba8292f-6ec1-4d32-91f7-9cdba6947b1a/DebateOnTheAddress>>.

main neutral. Moreover, in private, Eden is reported to have said that the British Government “preferred a rebel victory to a republican one”,¹¹ and criticised the republican side for behaviour that he overlooked on the rebel side.¹² The British Ambassador to Spain, furthermore, “blatantly admired” the fascists, and the Royal Navy in Gibraltar turned a blind eye to the German aircraft being used to transport rebel troops from Africa, and even permitted rebel forces to use communication facilities there.¹³ Officially the British policy of non-intervention was intended to ‘contain’ the war and prevent an escalation into a Europe-wide conflict; unofficially, British commercial interests looked upon the Popular Front with concern.¹⁴

The position of the US was similar. Although the Neutrality Acts officially prevented American companies from selling arms or materiel to belligerents in any war, loopholes existed that excluded participants in a civil war. While President Roosevelt publicly criticised businesses that continued to deal with the Republican side as being “unpatriotic” and not “ethically honest”, no such criticism was forthcoming for a number of companies, such as Texaco, who continued to supply the rebels, in some cases breaking contracts with the Republican government to do so: “Five tankers that were on the high seas in July 1936 were diverted to Franco, who received six million dollars worth of oil on credit during the Civil War.”¹⁵ For this, Texaco (whose president, Torkild Rieber, was increasingly outspoken in favour of the Nazis), was fined \$20,000.¹⁶ Texaco was not alone in this; Ford, General Motors, and numerous other companies all continued to supply the rebel forces; the total amount owed by the rebels to US companies has been estimated as \$100,000,000 by 1939.¹⁷

French non-intervention was of a different nature to that of Britain or the USA. The French government was, like Spain, a ‘Popular Front’ coalition of left-wing parties; in the days after the coup, he was contacted by the Spanish Prime Minister requesting aid, and his initial inclination was to do so. However, the precarious position of his cabinet, combined with British disapproval, turned him away from this course of action, and instead he

¹¹Will Podmore, *Britain, Italy, Germany and the Spanish Civil War* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1998).

¹²Beevor.

¹³Beevor, chaps 13–14.

¹⁴Preston, chap. 4.

¹⁵Noam Chomsky, ‘Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship’, in *American Power and the New Mandarins* (Pantheon Books, 2002).

¹⁶Preston, chap. 5.

¹⁷James M. Anderson, *The Spanish Civil War: A History and Reference Guide* (Greenwood Press, 2003).

proposed a Europe-wide policy of non-intervention, in the hopes that this would prevent aid reaching the rebels.¹⁸

Unlike the liberal democracies, fascist Italy and Nazi Germany had few qualms about intervening on behalf of the rebels. The most notorious case was that of the bombing of Guernica, but this was only one of many. As mentioned elsewhere, German planes were used to transport the Army of Africa over the Straits of Gibraltar, using Spanish and German front companies to hide the activity. However, despite the highly-visible role of the German Condor Legion, far more Italians than Germans served in Spain: around 50,000 at their peak, compared to a total of only around 16,000 Germans in total.¹⁹ Hitler's intervention was based on strategic concerns; a Communist, or even Popular Front, victory in Spain could lead to an alliance with France that threatened his plans for expansion. Mussolini's intervention, on the other hand, was based less on practical concerns and more on his feeling that the Nationalists in Spain were a 'sister movement' whose defeat would reflect badly on him.²⁰

A significant factor in the Republican defeat was the internal conflict between leftist groups. Before the war this had primarily been a conflict between the anarchist CNT/FAI, whose philosophy opposed any state, even a socialist one, and the socialist parties; while the CNT had faced repression from the right-wing governments, even the left-leaning Republican-Socialist government had used the Civil Guard to break up an 'illegal' CNT strike in 1931.²¹ These tensions were somewhat dampened in the 1936 election, where the CNT encouraged its members to vote for the Popular Front on the grounds that it was the lesser of two evils when compared with the reactionary CEDA coalition government. This truce with other leftist parties then continued once war broke out, but further tensions arose.

The outbreak of war was accompanied by a social revolution, particularly in Catalonia, which had a strong anarchist presence. "Every shop and café had an inscription saying that it had been collectivised ... Servile and even ceremonial forms of speech had temporarily disappeared. Nobody said *Señor* or *Don* or even *Usted*; everyone called everyone else *Comrade* and *Thou*, and even said *Salud!* instead of *Buenos días*."²² As the war progressed,

¹⁸Preston, chap. 4; Helen Graham and Paul Preston, 'The Popular Front and the Struggle Against Fascism', in *The Popular Front in Europe*, by Helen Graham and Paul Preston (Macmillan, 1987).

¹⁹Thomas, appx. 3.

²⁰Preston, chap. 5.

²¹Preston, chap. 2.

²²George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (Penguin, 2001), chap. 1.

this led to tensions between those on the left who felt this social revolution must continue, and those who felt that the primary goal was to win the war, and that social revolution should wait. The CNT fell into the former group, as did some of the socialist parties, including the POUM; the latter group included the Comintern-backed PCE and the International Brigades, as well as non-socialist Republican parties. Soviet policy was based on the idea that a Communist government in Spain would immediately earn the ire of capitalist Britain and America, and furthermore that for it to be seen to be backing Communist revolutions around the world would do little to improve its relationship with capitalist states. At a time when it was feeling increasingly threatened by Germany, and trying to dissuade the Western powers from pursuing their policies of appeasement towards Germany, further alienation was to be strenuously avoided.

The conflict within the Republican side came to a head with the “Barcelona May Days” in May 1937. A government raid on a CNT-controlled telephone exchange sparked several days of rioting between the CNT and POUM on one side and Communists on the other. Immediately afterwards the Communists demanded that the anti-Stalinist POUM be outlawed, and forced the Prime Minister, Largo Caballero, out of office when he refused; his successor, Negrín, saw no option but to co-operate with the USSR, and the POUM was violently suppressed.²³ Its leader was assassinated; others were arrested (though much later found not guilty) or fled the country.

Overall, the Nationalist victory can be attributed to no single factor. The economic and political situation of Spain created a highly polarised situation, with powerful factions on both the far left and far right; the past century had been spent in acrimonious, back-and-forth power struggles between liberals and conservatives. In particular, the reactionary inclination of the army, set against the mass support of revolutionary trade unions (the CNT alone had a membership of 1.58 million in 1934, around 5% of the population) seems bound to lead to conflict.

However, the international context cannot be ignored. Significant numbers of troops on both sides came from outside Spain, either as volunteers or as part of armies allied to the rebels. Furthermore, the dependency on foreign oil and equipment meant that the non-intervention policies of the Western powers had a critical effect — compounded by the flouting of these policies which disproportionately benefited the rebel side. (On a smaller scale, the Republican army’s dependence on Soviet supplies gave the USSR increasing influence over Republican policy as the war went on; it could be

²³Preston, chap. 8.

argued that if Britain or the USA had officially intervened on the Republican side they could have countered this to establish a Spanish Republic that was neither Fascist nor Communist.) It is very likely that, were it not for the international context of appeasement and non-intervention on the part of the Western powers, of “European civil war” between fascism and democracy, between capitalism and communism, the outcome of the Spanish Civil War would have been very different. A source at the Spanish Foreign Ministry after the war claimed that “without American petroleum and American trucks, and American credit, we could never have won”;²⁴ and according to one historian, “[h]ad aid been forthcoming from the United States and from England and France ... the Spanish Republicans could well have triumphed.”²⁵ It seems clear that, while the causes of the war were internal, the causes of the rebel victory were, at least to a significant extent, international.

References

Anderson, James M., *The Spanish Civil War: A History and Reference Guide* (Greenwood Press, 2003)

Baxell, Richard, *Unlikely Warriors: The British in the Spanish Civil War and the Struggle Against Fascism* (Aurum Press, 2012)

Beevor, Antony, *The Battle for Spain* (Orion Books, 2007)

Chomsky, Noam, ‘Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship’, in *American Power and the New Mandarins* (Pantheon Books, 2002)

Graham, Helen, and Paul Preston, ‘The Popular Front and the Struggle Against Fascism’, in *The Popular Front in Europe*, by Helen Graham and Paul Preston (Macmillan, 1987)

Hansard, ‘House of Commons Debate on the Address’, 1 November 1937 <<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1937-11-01/debates/dba8292f-6ec1-4d32-91f7-9cdba6947b1a/DebateOnTheAddress>>

Offner, A. A., *American Appeasement* (W. W. Norton, 1976) <<https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674422919>>

Orwell, George, *Homage to Catalonia* (Penguin, 2001)

Podmore, Will, *Britain, Italy, Germany and the Spanish Civil War* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1998)

Preston, Paul, *The Spanish Civil War* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1990)

Sugarman, Martin, ‘Against Fascism: Jews Who Served in the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War’, *Jewish Virtual Library*, 2016 <<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/spanjews.pdf>>

²⁴Beevor, chap. 13.

²⁵A. A. Offner, *American Appeasement* (W. W. Norton, 1976) <<https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674422919>>.

Thomas, Hugh, *The Spanish Civil War* (Eyre & Spottiswood, 1961)