

4 The Spanish Civil War: Ideology and conflict in the 20th century

4.1 Causes of the Spanish Civil War

Long-term causes: a fragmented country

- Spain is divided: regionalism and localism
- cultural, linguistic, historic, economic differences: preclude national cooperation
- some parts are economically strong, others technically backwards, parts have peasant landholders in agriculture, others are dominated by vast estates
- divisions reflected in the political organization 50 years prior to Civil War
- traditional triad of landowners, church and army
- land ownership is concentrated to relatively few families
- industrial areas: anarcho-syndicalism: decentralized worker-controlled committees, trade union model, shorter working weeks, higher wages, better working conditions
- poor rural areas: traditional anarchism: seek revolution, land redistribution, decentralized authority, freedom from taxes
- anarchism is not only a left-wing ideology: Marxists are fractured too
- by the time of Civil War: dizzying array of political parties

Short-term causes: the failure of the Second Republic and the Popular Front

- Second Republic: system of government: 1931 until end of civil war
- Popular Front: political strategy against right-wing parties: response to Fascism
- April 1931: popular support for Monarchy is eroded
- general elections in June: centre-left parties to power (Manuel Azaña)
- sweep agricultural, labour and anti-clerical legislation
- officially separate church and state, encourage cooperatives
- recognize civil marriages and divorces
- retire many officers to reduce army influence
- changes don't go far enough for left extremists and make right conservatives furious
- reforms alienate the right, majority of ordinary people are dissatisfied: make more than a dent in the widespread poverty
- great opposition to government: rebellion in Aug. 1932: revolt is easily put down, but shows how large the opposition is
- conservative rightists and radical leftists are not convinced by republic
- 1933 elections bring right-wing coalition: left denounces that and sets off new wave of unrest
- neither left nor right trust their political rivals
- new government reverses or ignores Azaña's reforms
- some Spanish leftists revolt as an attempt to avoid the fate of the German left who failed to resist the rise of the Nazis
- profound lack of faith in the democratic system: no democratic process can reconcile them

Immediate causes: the Popular Front and the Generals' uprising

- 1936: Spanish politics swing back to left
- electoral strategy encouraged by the Comintern
- leader of Spanish Socialist Party (Azaña) proposes cooperation between various left-wing parties to avoid vote splitting against more unified right-wing parties
- 1936: cooperate organizationally and mostly don't run candidates against each other
- defensive strategy: stop extreme right from taking power

- but there is no agreement to cooperate beyond the election: short-term solution
- still have deep ideological and political differences
- anarchists no longer encourage their members not to vote
- Popular Front is born out of lack of faith in the democratic system
- alarm of communist takeover, though there are no Marxists in cabinet; intensifies when Azaña is given post of president
- Azaña seeks to isolate the most vocally obstinate of the military leadership (threat to Republic)
- General Mola is transferred to remote post, Generals Goded and Franco are moved from their bases of support
- three rebels continue to organize military risings
- Azaña's government doesn't bring civil peace & stability: labour strikes and street fights between rival parties: army thinks that drastic action is required
- right-wing monarchist is assassinated on 13. July 1936
- Republican government does not act sufficiently fast to crush the revolt
- when crisis is clear: government arms left-wing organizations
- Republic depends on loyalty of Civil Guard: in some cases the CG sides with rebels
- on local level, quick action can determine whether revolt is successful or not
- if the rising gains momentum, the local army supports the Nationalists
- 19. July: government has limited manpower to storm garrison (barricaded by rebels)
- officers propose arming the local party militias
- militias are armed and garrison stormed: government is disempowered, local militias are armed
- effectiveness of militias' fighting is impaired by disagreements in parties
- government depends on these militias throughout the war
- Nationalists gain large areas in north central Spain, Madrid stays Republican due to poor organization and hesitation of rebels
- as loyalists are in favor to win even general Goded advises rebels to surrender
- Barcelona as heart of loyalist Spain
- clear pattern: government retains control where it accepts help of non-government organizations: government as central control is rather weak

4.2 Combatants

- overall forces are fairly well matched in numbers at the beginning of the war (July 1936)
- Nationalist steadily gain in numeric superiority
- from beginning large difference in training, skill, weapon: Nationalists have a distinct advantage

The Republicans

- compromised elements of military that remain loyal to the government and various militias
- these militias manage to arm themselves
- government is reluctant to arm them, but agree when crisis grows
- militias lack military training and leadership; ideological, political, strategic differences make coordination between militias difficult (exploited by Nationalists)
- consensus on strategic and tactical decisions is difficult
- contradictory operational plans end in endless compromises and negotiations
- overall goals are confused and at times contradictory
- ideological differences as most dangerous division
- communist party taking direction from Comintern removes anti-Marxist members from committees: street fight at which 500 militia members lay dead: distraction from fighting war
- localism is another distraction to good military planning
- Prime Minister Caballero reorganizes Republican forces into hierarchical structure (Sept. 1936)
- Kommissars who are Spanish communists increase steadily to have „correct“ ideology
- reorganization helps command and control but little improvement to coordinate militias
- militias true to their ideology refuse to submit to central authority
- much of Republican arsenal comes from USSR; Spanish manufacturing facilities remain in Republican hands
- Soviet tanks are comparable to German tanks used by Nationalists

The Nationalists

- military units which rebelled in July 1936; volunteers from right-wing organizations
- introduce conscription in areas they control: increase overall number
- Nationalists are supported by Catholic church in Spain and other conservative elements
- General Franco as military and political leader of Nationalists
- more uniform fighting ability: changes when conscription is introduced
- advantage in uniform command, which improves during war
- have weapons supplied from Italy and Germany
- aircraft is generally superior to Republican air force

The International Brigades

- western democracies follow policies of non-intervention, unofficially hope for Nationalist victory
- policies are supported by public opinion
- non-intervention not only stops official aid but makes it illegal for volunteers to travel to Spain and fight for the Republican cause (30'000 still manage)
- brigades represent countries from all over the world including USA, Britain, France, Canada
- brigades are organized by communist organizations and coordinated by the Comintern
- Comintern has recruiting centre in Paris and then smuggles volunteers to Spain: seven Brigades divided into battalions based on nationality: by 1938 Republicans disband Brigades and include remaining volunteers into Republican army
- Brigades are never numerically significant: effectiveness is still debated
- Brigades act as moral booster
- in some cases the Brigades buy time for the Republicans in several key battles

Overseas support

- Franco seeks aid from Hitler (already 25. July 1936)
- Hitler gives Franco twenty transport planes in North Africa
- publicly Hitler says he wants to stop spread of communism: Germany can benefit from Spain's instability as it is on France's south borders and Nationalist victory could give Germany access to Spanish natural resources
- Germany supplies Nationalists with all material contributions, most significantly aircraft
- air force as distinct advantage: Republicans have no air force
- bombings of air force are vital for Nationalists' victories
- Mussolini already helps before the Spanish Civil war and continues throughout it
- sends aid in material and personnel
- even reaches a secret agreement with Franco which guarantees Spanish support if Italy is attacked by France if Italy's aid increases to Nationalist
- Stalin does not enjoy the geographic advantage Hitler and Mussolini have to help Spain
- domestic concerns occupy Stalin
- Stalin still helps Republicans by Oct. 1936 with material but Republicans have to pay with Spain's gold reserves while Nationalists purchase material on credit
- Soviets play important organizational role: organize Brigades
- France is cautious in offering Spain support because of desire of its ally
- French Kopula Front Prime Minister suggests agreement to stay out of Spanish affairs
- creation of non-intervention committee: Italy, Germany, Soviet Union ignore the agreement
- agreement result: Republicans rely more on Russian support which Britain wants to avoid
- US have neutrality acts to remain neutral: don't sell arms to Republicans
- non-intervention severely damages the Republican war effort but has no real effect on Nationalist forces

4.3 Operations

- in early days the rebels only take control in Seville, all major industrial cities stay in government's hands

- Spanish navy stays loyal: Nationalists' best troops stay in Morocco
- British Royal Navy helps to relay messages at Gibraltar
- Hitler sends transport planes to get the rebels to the mainland: international intervention
- troops from Morocco are essential for the Nationalists' success
- evident that end will not be quick
- citizens use it as a chance to settle old scores with political or personal enemies
- Republicans target Falange members and Catholic clergy
- Nationalists target anarchists, communists and trade union members
- throughout most of the war Republican forces are generally on the defensive
- Nationalists fail to take the capital: emotional support for Republicans
- Franco's army receives support from Italy and Germany: two attacks on Madrid fail
- Basque area is also targeted and Bilbao, the capital, falls June 1937
- Republicans gain more battle experience throughout the war: fight more effectively, launch attacks themselves
- however their strength is undermined when tensions between communists and anarchists arise
- May 1937: tensions break into open warfare in Barcelona: unable to have a concentrated and organized military effort while Republicans shoot at each other

Bilbao and the north

- March 1937: Nationalists capture Basque region with its major industrial capital
- Basque region is geographically isolated so cannot be reinforced with Republican forces
- command and control is difficult because Basque commanders ignore orders from Madrid
- Nationalists have aerial supremacy and Republicans do not risk their air force as they would have to fly over Nationalist regions
- by 10. June city of Bilbao falls to Nationalists as their defenses are undermanned

Guernica

- Republicans do not send their air force to Basque region which allows the German Condor legion to bomb Basque cities
- 26. April an air attack is launched on Guernica
- decision to bomb is Franco's, carried out by German commander Wolfram von Richthofen
- bombardment takes place on a market day so there are more people: people fleeing are machine gunned
- reasoned either as military purposes or to spread terror and break the will to resist
- the only two military targets are left untouched by the carpet bombing

Madrid

- Franco's forces are unable to dislodge Republicans from the capital
- the capital is defended by International Brigades, anarchist forces and Republican army
- Franco tries during Nov. 1936 and Jan. 1937
- he then lays siege despite that it is a moral booster for Republicans

Jarama

- Feb. 1937: Nationalists launch major offensives on Jarama river as they try to cut off Madrid
- German Condor legion fights aside the Nationalists
- Republicans are initially outnumbered; understanding the gravity they rush in reinforcements including elements of the International Brigades: Nationalist advance is stopped
- Nationalists fail to cut the route but keep Jarama river
- battle is costly on both sides

Guadalajara

- similar pattern to Jarama
- the two battles are supposed to support each other but delays cause them to be separate

- Italian „volunteers“ from CVT supported by tanks: tank attack is badly organized
- outnumbered Republicans give way at first but with reinforcements push back again
- many casualties and a lot of equipment is left while fleeing

The Ebro offensive

- last major military operation of the war, also longest (end of July to mid-Nov. 1938)
- with sound preparation and element of surprise the Republicans advanced well
- objective is city of Gandesa but fail with many casualties of Popular Army and Intern. Brigades
- Ebro front settles into stalemate
- Nationalists use superiority in air power and artillery
- Republicans are ordered to hold at all costs
- results in war of attrition and Popular Army is left decimated and in a weak defensive position
- each side loses 60'000 casualties: Nationalists can weather that number, Republicans cannot

4.4 Effects of the Spanish Civil War

Why the Republicans lost

- as war progresses, Republicans constantly lose territory
- by Oct. 1937: Republicans' territory is reduced to large territory south and east of Madrid and a much smaller piece of land around Barcelona
- Republicans try to reconnect the areas with Ebro offensive but fail
- early 1939: last Republican strongholds fall and only Madrid and Valencia still resist
- Feb. 1939 (capital still in Rep. hands): Britain and France recognize Franco's regime as legitimate government of Spain
- last defenders surrender on 2. April 1939: Spanish Civil War is over
- reasons for defeat: lack of effective central command and control, political infighting, insufficient arms and materials
- weaknesses force Republicans into defensive position: victory is impossible
- offensives are often costly and ineffective
- Nationalists are able to use foreign aid effectively, notably from German Condor Legion
- Nationalists have efficient fighting capability from the beginning whereas Republican militias have to loan valuable experience at the expense of territory

Aftermath and significance of the war

- immediate cost is devastating: estimated 500'000 people die, July 1936 to April 1939
- most deaths are non-combatants
- many Republicans flee following Nationalist victory, settling France, South and Central America
- physical destruction will take years to recover from, also pre-war lack of development
- seen as „dress rehearsal“ for Second World War
- carpet bombing of civilians, use of air power and ideological reprisals debut in Spain
- call for international left to confront threat of spreading fascism
- war strategically weakens western democracies
- Britain's position in Gibraltar is threatened by a German and Italian ally
- France has fascist states on two borders
- Germany gains mining rights in Spain and Spanish troops appear on side of the Axis powers
- war has different roles depending on political perspective
- war reflects internal divisions within Republican and Nationalist sides and helps to explain how the war captivates imagination of the world in late 1930s
- war brings fascism to France's major borders, gives fascists access to Atlantic
- differences between Hitler, Mussolini and Franco: Franco's government survives into the 1970s