

## Introduction

### *Civil War in Twentieth-Century Europe*

The Spanish civil war was the most important political and military struggle in Europe during the decade prior to World War II. It not only polarized Spain, but produced an intense reaction among millions all over Europe and the Americas. The war was given many names. Leftists, as well as many liberals, termed it varyingly “fascism versus democracy,” “the people versus the oligarchy” (or “against the army”), “revolution versus counterrevolution,” and even “the future versus the past.” Rightists and conservatives at different times called it a struggle of “Christianity versus atheism,” “Western civilization against communism,” “Spain versus anti-Spain,” and “law and order against subversion.” These labels were antithetical, but nonetheless not always mutually exclusive, for the war was extremely complicated and contradictory, and there were greater or lesser amounts of truth in most of these appellations, although some were more accurate than others.

The war began over internal issues in Spain, but once all three major European dictatorships initiated limited intervention, many people began to see it as an international conflict by proxy. In other countries, attitudes were sometimes colored more by opinion about the intervening states than about the Spanish conflict itself, for the outcome was perceived by many as potentially changing the balance of power in Western Europe.

It is important to keep in mind that the civil war in Spain occurred in the middle of an era of civil war in many European countries, a period that stretched from 1918 to 1949. In that sense the Spanish war was unique above all because it was the only civil war to take place in a West European country, and the only one to break out during the interwar era,

as distinct from World War I and its immediate aftermath and World War II.

The three decades from 1914 to 1945 were the era of world wars, the most destructive conflicts in history, but in Europe, where these struggles began, this was also the period of the most intense internal political conflict. It produced civil wars in many countries – Russia, Finland, Latvia, Spain, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Poland, as well as extended insurgency and revolt in Germany, while a number of other countries sometimes found themselves on the brink of civil conflict. All this poses the question as to why the era of the most extensive international struggle was also the time of the most intense internal conflict.

Some of the major causes of the world wars are clear enough, in terms of the clash of competing empires and of nationalism, militarism, and closed economic competition, extensive application of modern industrial technology, modern mass mobilization, propaganda systems, and radical new ideologies. The wars often stimulated tensions within nations, as well, while other influences simultaneously encouraged internal conflict. The early twentieth century was a time of rapid and decisive change in industry, economics, and technology, and also in social and cultural transformation. Traditional society and culture were challenged as never before by the onset of what some historians call “classical modernity,” which produced unique problems and opportunities that were accompanied by unprecedented turbulence. The transformation of ordinary life by technology was paralleled by the rise of new political and social ideologies, which in certain cases evolved into mass movements. The liberalism of the preceding generations had become conservative, challenged by anarchism, socialism, communism, and radical nationalism, followed by fascism. Little, in fact, in the way of new ideologies has been introduced since that time.

Rapid transformation was accompanied by a sharp rise in popular expectations, which fueled further demands for change, often of a revolutionary nature. Social and political revolt erupted in the European and world periphery in the decade prior to World War I, beginning with the First Russian Revolution in 1905, followed by the Iranian revolution of 1906, the great Rumanian peasant revolt of 1907, the Young Turk rebellion of 1908, the Greek military revolt of 1909, the overthrow of the Portuguese monarchy and the beginning of the Mexican revolution in 1910, and the Chinese revolution in 1911.

These tensions moved inward from the periphery of Europe to its core during World War I, which increasingly strained political and social

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bonds within European states. The war, not the revolutionary movements, generated the breakdown of the Tsarist regime in Russia in 1917, and when the war ended in the following year, similar collapse or overthrow threatened in much of eastern and central Europe. The year 1919 was a time of unprecedented internal conflict throughout much of the world.

By 1918, civil war had broken out in Finland and Russia, and it was not the traditional kind of civil war in which two contestants engage in a power struggle with equivalent goals and similar values, but a new kind of revolutionary civil war of the sort first essayed in France during the 1790s and in 1871. In the new civil wars, sharply contrasting revolutionary and counterrevolutionary programs vied for power, aiming not merely at political domination, but at imposing totally contrasting programs in society, economics, culture, and even religion – two completely antagonistic ways of life, virtually two different civilizations. These civil conflicts were fought with unprecedented bitterness and violence, extending far beyond the field of battle. Red Terror and its counterrevolutionary counterpart during the Russian civil war sought not merely to conquer, but to some extent to eradicate the opposition completely, rooting out antagonists physically as well as politically, as though they represented contending religious or metaphysical principles, forces of absolute good or evil that had not merely to be conquered but completely extirpated. The result was unprecedented political violence in many different parts of the former Tsarist empire, while violent internal conflict also broke out in central and southern Europe. Some historians refer to the insurgencies and revolts that took place in Germany between 1918 and 1923 as the “German civil war,” but in fact German institutions never completely broke down. Hungary, however, underwent a three-month Communist dictatorship, whereas in Italy, three years of internal strife resulted in the development of a new kind of radical and violent authoritarianism in the form of Fascism.

Internal conditions within Europe only stabilized during the mid-1920s, then had to face new turmoil with the onset of the Great Depression in 1930. Millions of people turned to communism or variants of fascism as a remedy, although communism was not successful in spreading very far beyond the Soviet Union. Instead, half the countries in Europe fell under the domination of nationalist dictatorships, the most powerful and radical of which, Hitler’s Nazi regime, soon provoked another gigantic war. During this second world war, violence reached unprecedented heights both militarily and also sometimes politically, as sharp internal

conflicts broke out in a number of countries. Both Yugoslavia and Greece underwent major and prolonged revolutionary civil wars, while the imposition of Soviet-style communism in Poland produced a limited kind of civil war there, as in the former Baltic states, Ukraine, and Belarus.

This era of massive conflict only came to an end after 1945, when relative stability was achieved with the triumph of democracy in most of Western Europe and the imposition of communist totalitarianism in the east. During the three preceding decades, however, the level of internal strife within European countries had been without precedent in modern times.

In this perspective, civil war in Spain was not a complete anomaly, but rather the only massive internal conflict to break out in Western Europe during the 1930s. It would reflect all the tensions, hatreds and ideologies found in these other conflicts, while adding further features of its own, characteristic of Spain and to some extent of Europe as a whole during the decade before World War II.

## I

## Modernization and Conflict in Spain

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, Spain experienced less internal conflict than other large Western countries such as France, England, or Germany. This changed drastically, however, with the transition to modern politics in the nineteenth century, when Spain became the most conflict-prone country in Western Europe.

The long history of Spain has been marked by extreme heights and depths. It took the Romans much longer to conquer the peninsula – nearly two centuries – than any other part of their empire, but the land they called “Hispania” then became an important and integral part of the Roman world. It is from Rome that it would derive its name, languages, laws, culture, religion, and initial social development. After the breakup of Rome, the new kingdom of the Visigoths in what was then called “Spania” created the first of the historic nations of Europe, with a written legal code and the beginning of a new identity and institutional structure. Yet the Visigoths were never able to achieve political unity, and internal division contributed greatly to their sudden overthrow.

The course of Spanish history was drastically altered in 711, when a Muslim invasion overthrew the Visigothic monarchy and soon occupied most of the peninsula. During the next three centuries, most of the country became religiously and culturally Islamic, part of the Middle Eastern world centered on Mecca and Bagdad. Small, isolated Christian communities survived only with the greatest difficulty in the northern mountains, but they slowly became stronger until they eventually reconquered the entire peninsula. This was the only significant case in world history in which a major territory was not merely conquered militarily by Muslims, but also religiously and culturally Islamicized, and then was

completely reconquered by a portion of its native population, who not merely expelled the intruders, but also restored their own religion and culture. Had the Spanish never achieved anything else in all their history, this alone would have made them unique in human annals.

By the sixteenth century, the crown of Spain became the strongest military power in Europe and the ruler of a great multinational dynastic empire that stretched from the Low Countries to include Portugal, much of Italy, and part of eastern France. Even more important was the conquest and occupation of a very large part of the Western hemisphere and the Philippine Islands, creating the first truly world empire in history, one on which the sun never set. Spain was also the leader of the Counter-Reformation in religious affairs and achieved a Golden Age in high culture, particularly in religion, literature, and the arts. It reached the highest level of achievement in the last major phase of the traditional era in European history, just as that era was nearing its end.

At that point, Spain entered a precipitous decline, never to regain such eminence. Although its overseas empire survived for two more centuries, the exorbitant cost of endless dynastic wars, combined with the failure to participate in the new processes of development and modernization that were beginning in northwestern Europe, left it greatly weakened and impoverished, wracked by hunger and plague that reduced the population by more than 15 percent. After attaining a towering level in traditional Western culture, Spain remained partially fixed in a traditional mold – to a greater extent than any of its neighbors save Portugal – so that modern development constituted a major challenge, met with halting and limited success.

Past glories forgotten, during the seventeenth century, Spain became the object of myths and stereotypes, which have taken three forms. The first was the myth of the “Black Legend,” developed especially, albeit not exclusively, by Protestants abroad, who portrayed Spaniards as unusually cruel, aggressive, violent – even sadistic – and religiously fanatical. By the latter part of the seventeenth century, this was to some extent replaced by the stereotype of the proud, lazy, indolent, and feckless Spaniard, unable or uninterested in contributing to new progress and learning. Later, early in the nineteenth century, the third stereotype, that of “romantic Spain,” emerged, which put a new spin on perceived idiosyncrasies, and was the first of the myths to portray the Spanish in a partially favorable light. Foreign travelers and writers who developed this myth saw the country as a quaintly archaic, semi-oriental land that was fascinatingly resistant to modernization, with a colorful society that still prized values such

as honor, individual personality, physical courage, faith and idealism, tradition, and the arts – all qualities supposedly being lost in more modern but also more drab, uniform, and materialistic countries such as France or England. In these guises, Spain acquired a special image as a land of romance, quaintness, and tradition.

The eighteenth century, the last phase of the historic Old Regime, was a time of recovery, suddenly brought to a violent end by Napoleon's invasion in 1808. The War of Independence, as the Spanish called the six-year struggle that ensued, was more devastating than the wars in any other part of Europe, even though Spaniards gloried in the fact that the most powerful army in the world was never able to dominate their country completely, and that their popular resistance was much broader and more militant than that of any other enemy of Napoleon, serving as an inspiration to much of Europe. The French invasion, overthrowing the traditional monarchy, also opened the way for the beginning of modern Spanish politics, as patriotic liberals introduced the Constitution of 1812, the second written constitution in a large continental country. For the next three decades it would influence much of Europe. It also, however, revealed the beginning of the modern "Spanish contradiction," for it gave the country a more advanced political system than an underdeveloped society and economy, with its largely traditional culture and weak educational structure, could sustain. As a result, the sixty-five years that followed were a period of prolonged convulsion, the most confused era anywhere in Europe, as weak governments representing small sectors of society succeeded each other in kaleidoscopic fashion. Military "*pronunciamientos*"<sup>1</sup> followed in rapid succession, sectors of the army acting to change governments or to provide access to new groups. In 1821, the radical liberals, known as *Exaltados*, made their appearance and would be a regular feature of Spanish affairs for more than a hundred years, as new radical forces, each representing sectarian ideologies that appealed only to fractions of the population, sought to push the country into ever-more advanced change, for which it was completely unprepared. This "era of *pronunciamientos*," the time of maximal convulsion, reached a climax in the "democratic sexennium" of 1868–74, achieving its final *reductio ad absurdum* as the brief introduction of universal male

<sup>1</sup> The military "*pronunciamiento*" differed from a simple coup d'état that sought to seize the government directly. In a *pronunciamiento*, sectors of the army merely "pronounced," raising the standard of rebellion, inviting other units and political groups to join them and effect a change in government. This sometimes succeeded with little or no bloodshed. Often, however, it resulted in military combat in which the rebels sometimes lost.

suffrage, a temporary new dynasty, and finally a federal republic ended in a three-way civil war.

Altogether, there were five different civil wars in Spain in little more than half a century, three of them brief and relatively limited, one of them – the First Carlist War of 1833–40 – long, destructive, and costly in the extreme. Nineteenth-century civil wars were mainly contests between liberal monarchists and traditionalist monarchists (the latter known as Carlists from Don Carlos, the first traditionalist pretender to the throne), which ended in complete victory for the liberals. One way or the other, during the nineteenth century, Spain was at war for more years than any other country in Europe. The century began and ended with major wars against France and the United States, there were five civil wars of varying dimensions, a brief war with Morocco, and a grand total of twenty-five years of colonial campaigns in Latin America, as well as other minor skirmishes. Semi-constant conflict was a major factor in lagging economic development.

Stability was finally achieved under the restored constitutional monarchy of 1875, the country's first modern system to combine order and progress with basic civil rights. Economic and educational development accelerated after the turn of the century, and there was a new flowering of literature and the arts (the so-called Silver Age, after the Golden Age of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). Illiteracy decreased while public works expanded and the first modern social reforms were introduced. Industry developed more rapidly, agriculture slowly began to modernize its structure, and by 1930, less than half the labor force was employed in the countryside. Most censorship disappeared and elections slowly but steadily became more honest. The government avoided involvement in World War I, instead playing a humanitarian role of some importance and gaining major economic benefits as Europe's leading neutral. By the 1920s, the country achieved one of the highest economic growth rates in the world, as living conditions and health standards improved rapidly.

Nonetheless, the country entered a new era of political crisis in 1917, in one sense the victim of its very accomplishments, because partial modernization only accentuated remaining problems and contradictions. This was scarcely unique; these years were a time of intense conflict for most of Europe. The Spanish system was assailed by demands for total democratization in the form of a new republic on the one hand and for social revolution on the other. The Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and its trade union affiliate, the General Union of Labor (UGT), developed more slowly than their counterparts in other countries, but a different kind of



revolutionary worker movement emerged in the form of anarchosyndicalism, which came to dominate the rival trade union movement, the National Confederation of Labor (CNT). The anarchists sought a utopia based on autonomous communes and trade unions, without a central government.

The Socialists' first attempt at a general strike failed in 1917; nearly a hundred people were killed in the strike and its repression, and from 1919 political violence increased. Between 1897 and 1921, three prime ministers were assassinated by anarchists, and there were two other attempts on the principal leader of the Conservative Party and three attempts on the life of the king, Alfonso XIII. Outbursts of anarchist violence sometimes drew severe repression by the police and the military. The Socialists usually avoided violence, but the anarchists were flanked by an incendiary new rival, the small Spanish Communist Party (PCE), which further contributed to the political terrorism in which several hundred people were slain between 1919 and 1923.

The country faced horizontal cleavage as well as vertical sociopolitical conflict. Though Spain was one of the oldest, if not the oldest, historical states in Europe, dating from the Visigothic monarchy in the sixth and seventh centuries, it encountered much difficulty in becoming a modern and unified, politically mobilized nation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Geographically, it is divided by multiple mountain chains. Also, in addition to common Spanish, it is home to three other languages – Catalan in the northeast, Basque in the north, and Galician in the northwest. The problems of backwardness were compounded by very uneven economic development, with the bulk of it concentrated in the north and northeast. Because of these divisions and a lagging educational system, the sense of political unity or all-Spanish nationalism was comparatively weak, and by the early twentieth century was challenged by regional nationalist movements in the two most modern and industrialized areas, Catalonia and the Basque Country, each of which had its own language (though each region, in a typical Spanish fashion, was also severely divided internally). Basque nationalism was minoritarian for a long time, but Catalan nationalism gained strength much more rapidly.

Moreover, Spain's only new venture abroad blew up in its face. The country's leaders had avoided participation in the new European imperialism of the late nineteenth century, but France's takeover of nearly all Morocco in 1913 maneuvered Madrid into accepting a small protectorate over the northern 5 percent of that country, in order to safeguard its own frontiers. Native insurrection in northern Morocco, however, expanded

into the most dynamic revolt anywhere in the Afro-Asian world after 1919. It inflicted a humiliating defeat on the Spanish army in 1921, which further fueled a mood of crisis in Spain.

By this point, the country had become so fragmented that even a momentarily reunited Liberal Party was unable to provide effective leadership, and to the initial applause of many moderates and liberals, a senior military commander, General Miguel Primo de Rivera, introduced a temporary dictatorship in 1923. With French assistance, he resolved the conflict in Morocco, while repressing political violence inside Spain with minimal force. For five years the country enjoyed the greatest prosperity in its history, but by the end of the decade it reached a political dead end. The dictatorship had been heralded as a brief interregnum to solve problems, introduce more efficient administration, and achieve political reform. It did solve one or two problems temporarily, but also created a political desert, suppressing the old parliamentary parties without creating anything to replace them. Facing failure at the beginning of 1930, Primo de Rivera resigned, but no new leadership emerged to lead the way back to parliamentary government. Opposition mounted and also became more radical, calling for an end to the monarchy itself, even though the brief federal republic of 1873–74 had been a total and unmitigated disaster.

Hope nonetheless springs eternal, and thus the only revolutionary process in the midst of interwar Europe opened in Spain in 1931. It was absolutely unique in the Europe of that generation in not having been stimulated or catalyzed by war, but was the result almost exclusively of endogenous factors during a time of peace. It was by no means clear in 1931, however, that a revolutionary process, as distinct from a transition to full democracy, was beginning, for sudden change had been a common feature of Spanish political life during the preceding century.

Thanks largely to its neutrality, the country had been spared the full effects of Europe's post-World War I crisis, even though it underwent some of the same experiences encountered elsewhere. The immediate catalyst for regime change was the experience of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship from 1923 to 1930, even though it had been one of the mildest of all the forms of authoritarianism of the era. By contrast, when temporary dictatorships came to an end in Greece and Yugoslavia during those years, there was little resistance to the return of the old system.

Why was Spain different? There are several answers. In Greece, the dictatorship of 1926 was so brief that it failed to fully replace the