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PART I

THE *ANCIEN RÉGIME* 1874–1931

I do not know where we are going, but I do know
this – that wherever it is we shall lose our way.

SAGASTA.

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I

The Restoration, 1874–1898

> Finally I would say that though the Spaniards have wit, industry and means sufficient for the restoration of their kingdom, they will not restore it: and though entirely capable of saving the State, they will not save it – because they do not want to.
>
> Sebastiano Foscarini, Venetian Ambassador
> at Madrid in 1682–1686.

On Christmas Eve 1874 a Spanish general, Martínez Campos, halted the handful of troops that he commanded by an olive grove under the hill of Saguntum and made a speech at the end of which he proclaimed Alfonso XII king of Spain. The ragged conscripts, led by their sergeants, cheered. A few officers, who remembered they had sworn loyalty to the Republic, fell out. The rest, with shining eyes, dreaming of new uniforms and of promotion, remounted their horses and the column continued its march to Valencia. The last sixty years had seen a great many *pronunciamientos* of this sort – on an average one every twenty months – but none that was more successful. The First Republic fell without a shot being fired to defend it and a few weeks later the young king, then a cadet at Sandhurst, landed at Barcelona.

The man to whom the Restoration was due was not, however, a general. The *coup d'état* had been premature – the result of a competition between Army commanders to obtain the honour. The real architect of the new order

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was a Conservative politician, Don Antonio Cánovas del Castillo, who, ever since it had become clear that the revolution of 1868 would fail, had been carefully preparing it. He at once assumed the leadership of the provisional government and began the difficult work of drawing up the new Constitution – the sixth of that century – which was to last until Primo de Rivera overthrew it.

Cánovas was an unusually cultured and intelligent man, and he was under no illusions as to the moral and material condition of Spain at that time. He had spent the last four years studying in the archives of Simancas the causes of the rapid decline of Spain in the seventeenth century and in particular during the catastrophic ministry of the Conde de Olivares, whose situation, he observed, had in many respects been similar to his own. A man of exceptional talent, Olivares had come into power at a critical moment with the mission of saving and rebuilding the country – and he had failed. His mistake, as Cánovas saw it, had been the usual Spanish one – of attempting to carry out ambitious projects without sufficiently considering the economic and material means by which they were to be achieved. The Spanish national vice had always been over-confidence and optimism. Cánovas, who hated optimists, determined to take exactly the opposite path: to give the country a rest from civil wars and politics: to encourage it to build up its industries and enrich itself, and to hope that, as the ruling classes became by this process more European, they would lose some of their native sloth and egoism and acquire a greater sense of their responsibilities.

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There was nothing in the temper of Spain at this time to make these views unacceptable. A cloud of pessimism and inertia hung over everything. Patriotic Spaniards felt despair when they thought of the recent history of their country. The glorious national rising against Napoleon had been followed by twenty-six years of savage reaction and civil war: this had been succeeded by the anarchic rule of the generals which, under a delightful but scandalously unchaste queen, in a Ruritanian atmosphere of railway speculation and uniforms, had lasted for another twenty-eight. Then there had come a revolution and Isabella was turned out. The middle classes had risen because her camarilla governments had taken away their liberties, the generals had risen because she had chosen a lover who was not in the Guards, the people had risen because they had lost their common lands and because they disliked being sent to die in remote unhealthy climates in incomprehensible wars. But, when Isabella had gone, no agreement could be come to as to the best form of government: a king of the anticlerical house of Savoy was tried and rejected: then came the federal republic, which ended in disaster. The Carlists had overrun the northern provinces: there had been a 'Cantonalist' rising in the south which had to be suppressed by force. And now a Bourbon, a young insignificant-looking man, with none of the good looks of his reputed father, the Catalan guardsman, was on the throne again. Political feeling had never been lower, and though there was general relief that the form of government had been settled, no one felt any hope or enthusiasm as to the future.

It was in this not uncongenial atmosphere that Cánovas set out to build the new state. He was guided by two main principles – one to exclude the Army from political power – the other on no account to trust to free elections.

As to the Army – everyone now blamed it for the troubles and upheavals of the last thirty years. In the twenties and thirties it had been the champion of the weak middle classes who were more or less Liberal, and had saved the country from the dreaded Carlists. After winning the Carlist War, it had ruled the country itself, mainly for its own profit but also, to a certain extent, with the sanction of the middle and lower-middle classes. Now that Carlism, as it was thought, was finally crushed, its function was gone, and Cánovas determined that it should be reduced for ever to the normal role of armies – the defence of the country against outside enemies.

Cánovas' second principle is more difficult to explain. He greatly admired the English parliamentary system – to the point, it is said, of knowing many of the chief speeches of Gladstone and Disraeli by heart – and in his Constitution he imitated its outward form carefully. He also introduced a property qualification by which the (mostly illiterate) working classes were excluded from the vote. One would have supposed therefore that the middle and lower-middle classes could have been allowed to express their opinion freely and to choose their candidates at elections. But this is what he deliberately set himself to prevent. Although the press was free – that was one thing he insisted upon – there was not a single honest or genuine election to the Cortes during his life or indeed (since the system he set up continued after him) until the disappearance of the Monarchy in 1931.

The explanation of this anomaly is a simple one. Cánovas, as a politician, saw that Spain must be governed

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for a time by the upper classes, who alone could be counted on to support the new regime. But the country (that is to say those who had the right to vote) was mainly Radical with a strong admixture of Republicans, and under free elections they would have returned a Radical majority to the Cortes. This was the reason why the elections had at first, until the Monarchy should gain strength and prestige, to be controlled. Besides, there were more general and permanent reasons. Since the beginning of the civil wars distrust of public opinion had become endemic among Spaniards. The old happy sense of unity under King and Church had gone and left a crowd of suspicions behind it. Now Spaniards are by nature a suspicious and exclusive race: they live habitually in small compartments and like to settle their affairs through little sets or groups. Everything for their family, their friends, their dependants, their class, is their rule, and nothing for outsiders. Had the general voter been allowed in, no pact between the Liberal and Conservative parties could have been made, since they would not have trusted one another. The exclusion of that dangerous and unpredictable factor, public opinion, was essential.

Cánovas shared all this pessimism as to the reasonableness and ductibility of the people: indeed he extended it to his own class as well. *Son españoles los que no pueden ser otra cosa*, he once said, when asked to define, for the purposes of some clause of the Constitution, the limits of Spanish nationality – ‘Spaniards are those people who can’t be anything else’. And out of this pessimism came his belief that the affairs of the country must be conducted by a small, select class of politicians, the most intelligent, the most eloquent, the best educated, who could be trusted to

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do what was necessary. Thus, gradually, he hoped, serious currents of political opinion would be formed and the upper and middle classes – at present so inert and so egoistic – would wake up to their responsibilities. 'I come to galvanize', he used to say, 'the political corpse of Spain.' But in fact, like his predecessor Olivares, though for exactly opposite reasons, he merely caused it to decay more rapidly.

The middle years of the nineteenth century had seen Army dictatorships or reactionary governments interrupted every few years by military revolutions. Since 1814 no Liberal government had come in except by violence. Cánovas was too intelligent not to see the inconvenience and the danger of that. He therefore arranged that Conservative governments should be succeeded regularly by Liberal governments. The plan he followed was, whenever an economic crisis or a serious strike came along, to resign and let the Liberals deal with it. This explains why most of the repressive legislation passed during the rest of the century was passed by them. But in fact there was no longer any difference whatever between Liberals and Conservatives, except that the Liberals were anti-clerical and interested themselves in education, whilst the Conservatives professed a mild concern for agriculture and for social conditions.

In 1885 the King died of consumption and a few months later the Queen Regent gave birth to a posthumous child – Alfonso XIII. As the King lay on his deathbed the politicians met at the Palace of the Pardo and signed a pact by which the practice they had already initiated of taking turns at government was formally consecrated. So risks to the dynasty were avoided. Cánovas, who was then in power, resigned and his Liberal opponent Sagasta formed a government. To keep the Radicals quiet an act of Universal Suffrage was passed with a great blare of trumpets, but it made no difference at all. The rule remained that whatever government made the elections won them. This was so much a matter of course that the election results were sometimes published in the official newspaper before they took place. It was rare for even a single candidate who was not nominated by the Government to get in.

But perhaps it would be as well to explain how these results were obtained. The electioneering machine had its apex in the Home Office. From there orders were issued to the Civil Governors of the provinces giving them the names of the Government candidates and sometimes even the approximate majorities by which they must appear to win. Not all belonged to the same party. If a Conservative government was conducting the election, a fair number of Liberals and sometimes even an inoffensive Republican or two would be let in. The Government deputies did not wish, like the members of Fascist states, to talk in the void – they were cultivated, reasonable men, and to develop their ideas properly and to score points they needed an opposition. They were also artists of the spoken word and anyone who had a fine style of oratory, even if his views were somewhat heterodox, was given a seat.

The first task then of the Civil Governor, as soon as he had his orders from the Home Office, was to prepare the municipalities. If by some chance the right men had not been elected to these, an irregularity would be discovered in the accounts of the Council and others substituted in their place. The municipalities then drew up the lists of

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the voters. Naturally only those who could be trusted to support the official candidate were placed on the lists, and whenever the numbers of these were insufficient, the same persons would be put down several times. Even the dead could be called upon: on one occasion a whole cemetery, seven hundred strong, gave their vote, and it was edifying to see that though they had been illiterate in their lifetime, they had all learned to write in the grave.[1]

For some time these measures were sufficient: as, however, years passed and people began to show a real desire to elect their own candidates, further falsifications of the ballot became necessary. The simplest way of doing this was by *actas en blanco*. The members of the ballot committee would certify that they had counted the votes, but would leave the column of results blank for the Civil Governor to fill in as he pleased later. If for any reason this was impossible, the police would exclude voters,

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[1] This trick was called *pucherazo*. Speaking of the 'saturnalia' which took place when elections were to be held, Antonio Maura said: 'A swarm of high and low agents of the Government falls on villages and towns and unfolds the whole repertory of its overbearing acts, puts in practice all the arts of abuse, and realizes the most outrageous falsifications and manipulations and tries on the most ingenious tricks and deceits.'

He goes on: 'Then have you ever reflected upon a thing which has become to us axiomatic, but which is nevertheless strange? That after an election all the provincial governors have to be removed... This signifies anyhow a lesser evil – the fact that the governor who has put pressure on the alcaldes, who has bargained for their electoral support in exchange for his closing his eyes to all their immoralities and illegal actions... who has menaced and fined alcaldes who would not *servir al gobierno*, serve the Government, as the phrase goes, and has made a thousand enemies by these acts, finds the province too hot to hold him any longer.'

From a speech made in the Congress, 8 April 1891. 35 *años de vida publica*, vol. II, pp. 227–231.