

Mainline text

The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939

The Spanish Civil War was a complex conflict that had an impact far beyond the boundaries of Spain. Sixty-five years after its outbreak it continues to generate debate.

The war began with a military coup in Spanish Morocco on 17 July 1936 and on the mainland on 18 July. Right-wing officers rebelled against the democratically-elected government of the Second Republic (founded in April 1931) and its social reforms. The rebels opposed measures aimed at undermining the power of the Catholic Church and the armed forces, and the concession of regional autonomy to the Catalan and Basque regions.

Supported by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, the rebels under General Francisco Franco faced dogged resistance from the Republican working class and peasantry, and from anti-fascist volunteers from all over the world. The Republican war effort was undermined by divisions between those whose first aim was to win the war, and those who wanted to make social revolution. The Western democracies, including Britain, wanted no part in the war so the Republic turned to the Soviet Union for assistance.

The war ended on 31 March 1939 with Franco's victory. It saw the establishment of a third pro-fascist power on France's borders and altered the European balance of power in favour of Germany's Third Reich.

The Nationalists

The Nationalists, the name taken by those who rebelled against the Second Republic in July 1936, consisted of army, navy and air force officers, civilian militias from the fascist Falange, and from dissident monarchist and catholic organisations.

These front-line Nationalists were supported financially by wealthy landowners, industrialists and bankers, whose interests they defended against the reforming plans of the Republic. Behind them there stood those members of the middle and working classes who, for whatever reasons - opportunism, conviction or wartime geographical loyalty - threw in their lot with the regime.

The largest group consisted of those ordinary Spanish Catholics who supported the Nationalists as the defenders of religion and law and order. The two biggest advantages enjoyed by the Nationalists were the battle-hardened Army of Africa, consisting of the ruthless Spanish Foreign Legion and the Moorish mercenaries of the Native Regulars, and the aid provided by Hitler and Mussolini. On 1 October 1936, the leadership of the Nationalists was formally assumed by General Franco.

The Republicans

The Republican side consisted of many factions with different objectives. Broadly speaking, Republicans were all those who opposed the monarchy and supported the establishment of the Second Republic in 1931.

In 1936 they took up arms to defend democracy, the social reforms of the Republic and, in Catalonia and the Basque Country, regional autonomy. Many workers and peasants were also fighting for revolutionary goals: a new society based on common ownership of industry and agriculture. The principal political groups were those middle class liberals known as Left Republicans, the Socialist Party and the affiliated General Union of Workers (UGT), the Communist Party, the anarcho-syndicalist union, the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) and the anti-Stalinist communists of the small Workers Marxist Unification Party (POUM).

The central division was between those who gave priority to the war effort - the Republicans, most Socialists and the Communists - and those who wanted first to make the revolution - the anarchists, the POUM and the left Socialists. Having been refused support from the Western democracies, the Republic was forced to turn to the Soviet Union. Moscow, seeking alliances with the West against Germany, put its weight behind a centralised war effort and the stifling of the revolution. Russian support kept the Republic going but intensified its internal divisions.

International Brigades

Believing that when Madrid fell Paris and London would be next, volunteers from all over the world left homes and families to fight fascism in Spain.

Recruitment, transit and training was organised by the international Communist organisation but not all volunteers were Communists. The first units reached Madrid on 8 November 1936 and bolstered the resistance of the Spanish defenders. The volunteers helped defeat Franco's efforts to encircle the capital with heavy British and American losses at the Jarama valley in February 1937. In March, Italian volunteers of the Garibaldi Battalion aided the defeat of their Nationalist compatriots at Guadalajara.

The Brigades played a substantial role in later offensives at Belchite, Teruel and the Ebro, the dwindling band of survivors held together by shared ideals. In the vain hope of changing the attitude of the non-interventionist Western powers, the Republic unilaterally withdrew the volunteers, holding a farewell parade in Barcelona on 29 October 1938.

Some 45,000 volunteers had come from over fifty different countries. Nearly 20% of them died and most suffered wounds of varying degrees of severity. The French provided the largest contingent, followed by the Germans, the Americans and the British.

Aid for Spain

Fearing that a left-wing Spain might become a Soviet satellite, the Western democracies put class prejudices before strategic interests. Britain, France and the United States declared neutrality, leaving the Spanish Republic dependent on the Soviet Union.

Many ordinary citizens in the democracies were appalled by government neutrality that effectively favoured Franco. Thousands went to Spain either to fight with the International Brigade or to serve as doctors and nurses. Others took part in campaigns to raise money for food, arms and medical supplies for the Republic.

In Britain alone, the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, an umbrella organisation founded in January 1937, co-ordinated the work of more than 150 welfare organisations and other groups dedicated to helping the Spanish Republic. Only a handful of similar organisations worked for Franco and very few volunteers from the democracies fought on the side of the Nationalists.

After the war, the welfare organisations and the International Brigades associations tried to arrange for Spanish refugees to reach safety in democratic countries. They helped to find them jobs and accommodation or to go into exile in Latin America. Later these refugees became the focus of anti-Franco activities in Britain, France and the US.

Bombing

For many, the Spanish Civil War is symbolised by the bombing of Guernica in April 1937. That is less because of the power of Picasso's painting than because Guernica saw the first extensive destruction of an undefended civilian target by aerial bombardment.

Guernica was part of a trial run of the ground-air coordination tactics that underlay the Blitzkrieg in the Second World War. Newsreel pictures of the damage done by German and Italian bombing raids on Madrid and Barcelona and of civilians taking shelter in underground railway stations also helped to burn the war into the European consciousness. Such images foreshadowed the new and horrific form of modern warfare that was to come.

It was a reflection of the comparative resources of the two sides that most bombing during the war was carried out by German and Italian aircraft on behalf of Franco. The Republic had very few bombers and carried out only sporadic and ineffective night raids on Nationalist towns.

Art and Literature

The Spanish Civil War generated a unique outpouring of artistic and cultural responses. There was widespread support for the Republican cause among artists, writers and intellectuals.

A number of writers went to Spain and subsequently wrote major works based on their own experiences there, including George Orwell, Ernest Hemingway and Andr   Malraux. Some - Federico Garc  a Lorca, John Cornford and Julian Bell among others - were victims of the war.

Pablo Picasso, Joan Mir   and other artists produced important paintings. Picasso's *Guernica* was to become a symbol of the conflict and is recognised as one of the greatest paintings of the twentieth century. The war also saw the emergence of photographers like Robert Capa, David Seymour and Agusti Centelles, and inspired composers such as Benjamin Britten and Samuel Barber.

End of the war and exile

Franco's dictatorship was the institutionalisation of his victory. He had deliberately fought a slow war of attrition, with horrific purges in each piece of captured territory, as an investment in terror to underpin his future regime.

When Catalonia fell in late January 1939, hundreds of thousands of women, children, old men and defeated soldiers trudged towards France through bitterly cold sleet and snow. They were placed in transit camps. By 31 March 1939 all of Spain was in Nationalist hands. Few of the refugees gathered at the Mediterranean ports escaped and the majority were interned.

About 350,000 people were killed in the course of the war. There were atrocities on both sides. At least 50,000 people were subsequently shot by the Francoists between 1939 and 1943. Prisoners numbered nearly one million and some were forced into work battalions to be used as cheap labour in the construction of dams, bridges, and irrigation canals. About 400,000 Republicans went into exile. Half of Spain's railway rolling stock and a third of its merchant fleet had been destroyed and the transport infrastructure had collapsed.

Franco's dictatorship was to last until his death in 1975.

Credits panel

The Spanish Civil War: Dreams + Nightmares

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D24 text (short introduction)

The Spanish Civil War Remembered

The Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939 continues to influence and inspire artists and writers in Spain, Britain and around the world. Resonances of the war can still be found in popular culture today - in films, music and literature.

Surviving members of the International Brigades, most now in their mid-eighties, still meet to recall their time fighting fascism in Spain and to remember those who died.