

FI82 The Spanish Civil War and France, 1936–39

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Q. What events led to the Spanish Civil War? Once hostilities had broken out, what was the course of the war between 1936 and 1939?

A. The roots of the civil war in Spain in 1936 lie deep in Spain's history. Spanish society was still a highly structured and hierarchical one with a privileged minority owning much of the land, which was then leased to the peasantry. Spanish peasants were still expected to pay certain dues to their landowner, while the Catholic Church in Spain sided with the conservative land-owning classes in order to protect its interests from an increasingly liberalized and pro-republican Spanish bourgeoisie. Discontent with the Church expressed itself among many Spanish workers in their subsequent affiliation with anarchism and the belief in revolution as a way of affecting profound social change, allowing for happiness in this world rather than waiting for it in the next. In August 1934 the anarchists of Asturia attempted an uprising that was brutally put down by General Franco and the Spanish Foreign Legion (the *Tercio*). The role of the military in Spanish history, and in the war itself, of course, cannot be ignored. The Spanish army, in particular, had more officers per enlisted men than any other European army and was perceived by many as top heavy in the higher ranks. The attempts made by the Second Republic in the 1930s to reduce the number of officers all met with increased resentment from the officer classes.

The Spanish Civil War broke out on the 17th July 1936 with a military insurrection (or *pronunciamineto*) against the democratically elected government of the Spanish Republic. The latter was a Popular Front government (*Frente Popular*); that is to say, an alliance of left-wing parties, including socialists and communists, which was designed to counter the rise of the Far Right in Europe. The anarchists were not represented in government, however, as this movement was totally opposed to social reform through parliamentary means. In March 1936, the government decided to ban the Falange, an authoritarian right-wing party modelled on Italian and German party lines, and imprisoned its leader, José Antonio Primo de Rivera. The election victory of the Popular Front was accompanied by the freeing of political prisoners of the Left, primarily those involved in the Asturian uprising, and the burning of Church buildings. Strikes followed in April as trade unions grew impatient with the slow pace of social reform; the majority of the land still belonged to a privileged minority; and wages still lagged behind those in the rest of Europe. Violence escalated when, on the 12th of July, Lieutenant José Castillo, an officer in the Republican Assault Guards, was assassinated by the Falangists. The Spanish monarchist leader, José Clavo Sotelo, was then murdered in revenge. A series of military risings, which had been planned since the spring, began on the 17th of July. In Madrid and Barcelona these were defeated by anti-fascist militias and the arming of the people by a government which was beginning to realize that much of the Spanish army was sympathetic to the insurgents and would not remain loyal.

Over the next few months the Republic would come to rely increasingly on the militias, which were usually drawn from the ranks of trade unions, many of them anarchist, and, from the 12th of August 1936 onwards, the International Brigades. These brigades were bands of volunteers from all over the world, including many Frenchmen, and refugees from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Gradually these forces were moulded into a Republican army to counter the Spanish army under General Franco. The Nationalists, as the insurgents now became known, were a disparate group of monarchists, fascists, conservatives and Catholics, committed to ending the Popular Front and what they perceived as Moscow's influence on the Iberian Peninsula. They enjoyed support from the fascist states, with Germany loaning the Nationalists several thousand technicians and aviators in the form of the infamous Condor Legion. The Italians also sent several thousand troops who took part in the battles of Guadalajara, San Sebastian and Bilbao. The Spanish Civil War therefore became internationalized within a matter of days. For the fascist states in particular, it became a testing ground for new military technology; the bombings of civilians in Guernica and Madrid were the forerunners of the carpet bombings of British and, ironically, German cities in the Second World War.

Despite some initial victories, the Republican army suffered a series of defeats from 1937 to the end of the war. The Nationalists were able to capture much of the Basque region by the summer of 1937, conquering northern Spain in the autumn of that year and forcing the Republican government to abandon Valencia (where it had fled following the siege of Madrid) for Barcelona. 1937 was also marked by disastrous internal divisions in the Republican camp; the communists were already beginning to gain greater influence over the government, thanks to the aid afforded to the Republic by the USSR. The communists were also seen by many as essential to the organization of the Republican army which, in turn, was essential to winning the war. The anarchists, on the other hand, considered the Spanish Civil War to be a revolution and believed that the communist organization of the war effort was detracting from their revolutionary aims. The result was an internal civil war which led to the repression of the anarchist trade unions and their militias by Republican forces in the spring of 1937.

In April 1938 Nationalist forces managed to divide the Republic into two zones, connecting their territory in the North with the South. Attempts to negotiate a peace failed and the war continued throughout that summer. In the autumn of 1938 all international combatants from both sides were forced to withdraw under an agreement brokered by France and the United Kingdom. This deprived the Nationalists of its Italian and German volunteers, but left the Republican army seriously depleted with the withdrawal of the International Brigades. In January 1939, Barcelona fell to the Nationalists, leading to a mass exodus by the Catalan population to France. On the 27th of March, Madrid fell to Franco's forces and, on the 1st of April, Franco announced that the war was over.

Q. How did the French Popular Front government react to the events in Spain? What was appeasement?

A. The initial and instinctive reaction on the part of the French *Front Populaire* to the military insurrection was to support its sister republic in Spain. The leader of the French government, Léon Blum, responded to the Spanish Republic's request for arms on the 19th of July by ordering planes and artillery to be sent across the border on the 21st of July. Following his visit to London on the 23rd and 24th of July,

however, the convoy of munitions was halted, only to be allowed to continue its journey on the 2nd of August. Officially, though, the French government's attitude was one of non-intervention, and this was for three reasons, according to David W. Pike (1968). First, the Blum government was more concerned with the threat posed by Nazi Germany. It was, therefore, more important to achieve further rapprochement with the British government, a government that was suspicious of the Spanish Popular Front. Second, Blum could not guarantee support for extensive military support for the Republican cause from the French Senate. Recently, this body had reluctantly agreed to a series of new labour laws and was anxious to put a stop to other activities that might further alienate conservatives. Finally, the government was aware that supporting the *Frente Popular* would further antagonize an already hostile right-wing press in France, much of which, like Charles Maurras's Action Française, already supported Franco and the nationalists (Pike, 1975: 65–6).

After this initial support, and despite Blum's personal sympathy for the Republican cause in Spain, the French government adopted a policy of appeasement and non-intervention, in line with the wishes of the United Kingdom and the French Parti radical, on whose support Blum depended. This policy led France to pursue the closure of the Spanish border to all foreign parties who wanted to engage in or influence the fighting in Spain. Along with Britain, France formed the *Comité de Londres* which encouraged 27 nations to sign a non-intervention agreement on the 27th of August 1936. These included Germany (which had already sent the Condor Legion and several thousand technicians to Nationalist Spain), Italy (which had approximately 50,000 troops fighting for Franco), Portugal (which had the third largest contingent of troops in Nationalist Spain), and the USSR (which began supplying arms and technicians to the Republicans in the autumn of 1936). In 1937, and in the face of blatant contravention of the pact's principles, the Committee secured agreement by the signatories to halt further intervention and the right of inspection along the Franco-Spanish border.

The aim of non-intervention, like the Munich Pact of 1938, was to prevent a generalized European war in the short term. France's aim, in addition to those listed above, was to avoid antagonizing the fascist states by supplying arms to those who were fighting against Italian soldiers and German aviators. It also reflected a cautious approach; if the Republicans lost, France did not want to be seen to have sided against the victorious Nationalists who, in any event, would feel a greater sympathy towards the fascist states. France would then find itself surrounded by antagonistic Far-Right military states. The policy of withdrawing all international troops from both sides, brokered by Britain and France in 1938, was a deliberate attempt to distance French from the International Brigades and to distance Nationalist Spain from its Italian and German sponsors.

Q. What impact did the Spanish Civil War have upon French politics and society?

A. As we might expect, French society was divided by the Spanish Civil War along existing ideological grounds. The Right in France was nearly unanimously non-interventionist and sought to exploit even the slightest evidence that the French Popular Front had been aiding the Spanish Republic (witness their assault on Blum when, on the 25th of July 1936, they discovered he had personally ordered the dispatch of planes and artillery to Spain). The initial sympathy of some on the Right (notably, the monarchist Action Française and certain Catholic intellectuals) lay with

the Nationalists. The Far-Right press spread rumours and stories about Republican atrocities (known as the red terror) and, as the war progressed, denied those committed by the Nationalists and the bombing of civilians in Republican towns and cities. Some even called for intervention on behalf of the Nationalists, in order to counter the Republican International Brigades with Far-Right French volunteers. In reality, however, there were only some 250 Frenchmen who fought for Franco in the course of the war. Many others on the Right, such as the Catholic intellectuals, Georges Bernanos and François Mauriac, who had both felt initial sympathy for the Nationalists, came to reject their use of terror directed against a civilian population. Indeed, most French Catholics opposed intervention or support for either side.

Arguably, there was no unified response on the part of the French Left, either. Although many felt instinctive sympathy with the Spanish Republic, there was a section of the Left which remained pacifist and therefore committed to a policy of moral support only. The legacy of the First World War, which is reflected more generally in the policy of appeasement operated by France and Britain in the 1930s, can also be perceived in many sympathizers with Republican Spain refusing to sanction combat, albeit in the struggle against what many considered to be another fascist regime in the making. In the minds of many French people, war remained a greater evil than Fascism. The French Communist Party, however, went against official Soviet advice and began to organize support for the Republic in the summer of 1936. French anarchist organizations were similarly pro-Republican and pro-interventionist, as were a good many French socialists. The Centre-Left Parti radical, however, remained non-interventionist throughout the war, exerting considerable influence over the Popular Front government and its role within the *Comité de Londres*.

Just as no single response to the war existed politically, so French society as a whole was divided, although opinion polls of the time show initially strong support for the Republic. As the war progressed, however, many came to accept Franco's victory as inevitable and began to consider ways of maintaining a peaceful coexistence between the two nations. Yet, the war led, as Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre stated at the time, to a realization on the part of many French people that they were engaged in a process of historical change and that no individual could escape responsibility for the events that were unfurling throughout Europe.

Q. How many French volunteers fought on the Republican side?

A. If there was broad support for the government's policy of non-intervention, there was also considerable support for engagement with the Spanish Republican cause. Pike estimates that some 10,000 Frenchmen joined the International Brigades in the course of the war, the highest single contribution by any nation (1968: 161). Nicholas Hewitt puts this figure at 9,000 and states that 3,000 Frenchmen gave their lives for the Republican cause. The International Brigades were divided according to nationality and language, the French battalion also consisting of Belgian and Swiss citizens, but came under central Republican command. Members of these brigades were usually committed anti-fascists, left-wingers, socialists or communists. Some were unemployed workers, but very few of them had any military background.

Certain individuals also played a considerable role in the war. The French novelist André Malraux was an early volunteer for the Republican cause, organizing an international squadron in the summer of 1936 and flying several missions himself. His experiences are fictionalized in the activities of Magnin and the international

squadron in his Spanish Civil War novel *L'Espoir* (1937). Other French intellectuals to fight on behalf of the Republic were André Chamson and Jean-Richard Bloch. Others, like the communist poet, Louis Aragon, wrote on behalf of the Republic, while Jean Cocteau and others supported the Republic financially, giving to charity auctions, and so forth.

Q. What impact did Franco's victory in April 1939 have upon France?

A. Politically, the impact of Franco's victory was perhaps less significant than it might have been. France and Britain had recognized Franco's regime on the 27th of February 1939, one month before the war ended. The French Popular Front had been dismissed from office in April 1938 and the conservative appeaser Daladier had become prime minister, pursuing an anti-communist programme and policies aimed at curtailing the rights of foreigners, including an increasing number of Republican exiles. In this Daladier was attempting to appeal to the French Right, elements of which had been drifting towards authoritarianism for some time. However, the result was to make France an unappealing, if not inhospitable, place to the many thousands of Spanish exiles who, in order to escape Nationalist reprisals, continued to flow across the border from 1938 onwards, and to signal France's definitive rupture with the Spanish Republic. These refugees were detained in the most rudimentary of concentration camps in the South-west of France where, guarded by the French army, they fell prey to disease and hunger. Hundreds were to die here.

Moreover, Franco's victory was overshadowed by the entry of German troops into Prague on the 15th of March 1939. Indeed, since the Nazi invasion of Austria in March 1938, France had become far more preoccupied with the activities of its neighbour to the East. As Daladier and Chamberlain negotiated the Munich Accord in the autumn of 1938, so the threat from Nazi Germany came to dominate the pages of the French press and the minds of its readers. The invasion of the Sudetenland in March 1939 demonstrated Hitler's contempt for the Accord and the Western democracies. The continued inaction of France and Britain in the face of such aggression was only the latest example of a policy of appeasement and passivity which had begun with the military insurrection in Spain. Franco's victory, most French people realized, represented a minimal threat to the Third Republic. Spain had been exhausted by the civil war and would have been unable to join a German and Italian alliance against France in the autumn of 1939. Moreover, in order to gain recognition by Britain and France, Franco had openly declared Spain's intention to remain neutral in any European conflict.

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