A SHORT HISTORY OF

THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

Julián Casanova

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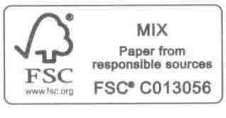

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Introduction

THE ROOTS OF THE CONFLICT

In the first few months of 1936, Spanish society was highly fragmented, with uneasiness between factions, and as was happening all over Europe, with the possible exception of Great Britain, rejection of liberal democracy in favour of authoritarianism was rife. None of this need have led to a civil war. The war began because a military uprising against the Republic undermined the ability of the State and the republican government to maintain order. The division of the army and security forces thwarted the victory of the military rebellion, as well as the achieving of their main objective: the rapid seizure of power. But by undermining the government's power to keep order, this *coup d'état* was transformed into the unprecedented open violence employed by the groups that supported and those that opposed it. It was July 1936 and thus began the Spanish Civil War.

The history of Spain in the first third of the twentieth century was not one of secular frustration sliding inevitably into an explosion of collective violence, or of an accumulation of failures and defects in industry, agriculture and the State, that prevented the country from following the road to progress and modernisation.

The history of Spain in those three decades did not run its course independently of the rest of Europe, nor was it any stranger to the social, economic, political and cultural transformations experienced by the rest of the continent. There were many more similarities than

differences, particularly with her southern European neighbours. Historians also know that there is no 'normal' model of modernisation with which Spain could be contrasted as being an anomalous exception. Hardly any country in Europe resolved its conflicts of the 1930s and 40s – the century's dividing line – by peaceful means.

Two world wars with a 'twenty-year crisis' in between marked the history of Europe in the twentieth century.[1] It took only three years for Spanish society to undergo a wave of violence and an unprecedented disdain for the lives of others. Despite all that has been said about the violence that preceded the Civil War, in an attempt to justify its outbreak, it is clear that the *coup d'état* of July 1936 marked a watershed in twentieth-century Spanish history. Furthermore, for at least two decades after the end of the Civil War in 1939, there was no positive reconstruction, such as had occurred in other countries in western Europe after 1945.

FROM MONARCHY TO REPUBLIC

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Spain was a debilitated country. She had just lost Cuba, the Philippines and Puerto Rico, and *El Desastre (The Disaster)* of 1898, as the final collapse of the old empire and the loss of the last colonies was called, saw an increase of pessimism among the people, although the debate as to how to 'regenerate' the country also opened new paths towards the democratisation of the political institutions and society.

Upon reaching the age of majority in 1902, Alfonso XIII came to the throne of Spain, after swearing the Constitution, a text that had been in force for 25 years. The political system in Spain at the time was known as the Restoration, a system in which power was held alternately by two parties consisting of distinguished liberals and conservatives, who controlled the administration through a political structure based on *caciquismo*,[2] a network of patronage that also operated at the time in other Southern European countries, such as Italy and Portugal.

The challenge facing Alfonso XIII and the political elite was to embark on a reform of the political system from above, in order to prevent revolution from below – a reform which would broaden the

social bases without threatening their control. The political history of Alfonso XIII's reign tells the story of the failure of this venture. The king intervened in politics in an attempt to manipulate internal divisions within the liberals and conservatives, with factions, patrons and *caciques* all struggling for a share of power. Furthermore, along with problems inherited from the nineteenth century, such as clericalism and militarism, there were new ones to contend with, such as the war in Morocco, Catalan nationalism, the appearance of a more radical republicanism and the growth of an organised labour movement.

Between backwardness and modernisation, stagnation and slow but steady progress – these were the paths that Spanish society seemed to be taking during the first three decades of the twentieth century, judging by the accounts of various observers of the time and the latest historical studies. A good many testimonies of the time transmitted a lasting image that Spain, the Spain that had just lost the last vestiges of its colonial past, was a rural and backward society, barely industrialised, with parasitic landlords and a bourgeoisie that was weak and lacking initiative. However, 100 years later, historians have revised this image, comparing it with that of other countries with the same profile, and they have demonstrated, backed up by evidence and figures, that what really occurred were alternate phases of underdevelopment and industrialisation.

Between 1900 and 1930 Spain experienced a period of marked modernisation and economic growth. The principal cities doubled their population. Barcelona and Madrid, with over half a million inhabitants each in 1900, reached 1 million three decades later. Bilbao went from 83,000 to 162,000; Zaragoza from 100,000 to 174,000. Admittedly, these populations are not particularly significant if we compare them to the 2.7 million in Paris in 1900, or the number of European cities, from Birmingham to Moscow, including Berlin and Milan, whose populations were higher than Madrid's or Barcelona's in 1930. But the demographic panorama was undergoing a notable change. The total population of Spain, which was 18.6 million at the beginning of the century, reached almost 24 million in 1930, due mainly to a sharp fall in the death rate.

Up to 1914, this demographic pressure had given rise to a high rate of emigration, but from the First World War (which Spain did

not participate in) onwards, it was Spanish cities that experienced mass immigration. In the first three decades of the century, the average life expectancy rose from 35 to 50, and the illiteracy rate fell from 60 to 35 per cent, the result of considerable progress in primary education and the educational and cultural improvements that went with urban growth.

Around 1930, the rural world was still predominant in many areas of Spain, but the agricultural labour force amounted to less than 50 per cent of the total active population. The agricultural sector grew in productivity, area sown and crop diversity, although it was losing ground to the secondary sector. Industry, with a million new workers since the start of the century, doubled its production and the tertiary sector, albeit at a slower rate, showed obvious signs of growth and renovation in the transport system as well as in business and the administration.

In the years between Alfonso XIII's ascension to the throne and the eve of his overthrow, the national income doubled and Spain, while experiencing major regional disparities, in general narrowed the gap between itself and other European countries.

The society that resulted from these changes was also diverse and complex. At the top were the 'good families' of the bourgeoisie who, through the banks, controlled the large industries and influenced the economic policies of the governments during the reign of Alfonso XIII. It was a capitalism that was protected by the State, with high tariffs, corporative and familiar in style, good examples of which were to be found in Catalonia, Asturias, Vizcaya and Madrid. However, the true summit of this society was occupied by the rural oligarchy, a new class of rural landowners, large landholders in the south, who had acquired their land as a result of nineteenth-century confiscations. Most of them did not belong to the nobility, but a good many achieved titles through marriage, which meant that large tracts of land ended up in the hands of just a few families. Landowners who became ennobled and industrialists and bankers who also obtained titles: in short, a convergence of the old and new nobility, producing what the historian Manuel Tuñón de Lara called a 'power block'.[3]

The members of this dominant social block were the heirs of the old privileged classes, the aristocracy and the Catholic Church, as

well as the rural and Basque and Catalan industrial oligarchy. And this block provided most of the figures who governed in a political system, Alfonso XIII's monarchy, against which emerged the republican, anarchist and socialist seeds that had been sown in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

The political system presided over by Alfonso XIII was unable to widen its base, or channel through parliament the various interests of these social classes that had originated from industrialisation, modernisation and urban growth. The people, the working classes, with their organisations, collective actions and mobilisations, appeared on the public stage and relentlessly demanded not to be excluded from the political system. What was at first merely a whisper brought about, in April 1931, the collapse of the pinnacle of this system.

Previously, the king and the army had tried to forestall this, with a dictatorship imposed by General Miguel Primo de Rivera in September 1923, but when this dictator fell, on 26 January 1930, abandoned by the king, hostility towards the monarchy spread unchecked through rallies and demonstrations throughout Spain. Many monarchists, some of them distinguished names, abandoned the monarchy, convinced as they were that it was better to defend conservative principles within a Republic, than to leave the way open to the parties of the left and the workers' organisations. Republicanism, which until then had been weak, unable to break the control of *caciquismo* and propose real alternatives, became in just a few months a movement with various political parties, with well-known leaders such as Manuel Azaña, and new social bases.

The call to municipal elections on 12 April 1931, to be followed later by a general election, designed by the authorities to control the process of returning to constitutional normality after Primo de Rivera's dictatorship, caught the traditional conservative and liberal right unprepared and in disarray, and the extreme right, those loyal to the fallen dictator, in a process of reconstruction and as yet unable to mobilise its counter-revolutionary forces.

The elections on 12 April became a referendum to choose between the monarchy or a republic. Up to the very end the monarchists thought that they were going to win, confident of their ability to manipulate the mechanism of government. And this is why they

showed their 'consternation' and 'surprise' when they learned very soon of the republicans' victory in 41 of the 50 provincial capitals. The following day, many municipalities proclaimed the Republic. Niceto Alcalá Zamora, a former liberal minister in the monarchy, and chairman of the Revolutionary Committee formed by republicans and socialists, called for the king to leave the country.

'The elections held last Sunday clearly show me that I do not have the love of my people today', wrote King Alfonso XIII in a farewell note to the Spanish people, before leaving the Royal Palace on the night of Tuesday 14 April 1931. When he arrived in Paris he declared that the Republic was 'a storm that will soon blow over'. It was to take longer to blow over than Alfonso XIII thought, or indeed wished. This Republic was to experience over five years of peace, until a military uprising and a war destroyed it by force of arms.[4]

THE REPUBLIC

The Republic was welcomed by celebrations in the streets, amid a holiday atmosphere that combined revolutionary hopes with a desire for reform. The crowds took to the streets, as may be seen in contemporary press reports, in photographs and in the numerous testimonies of those who wanted to put on record this great change that had a touch of magic, that arrived peacefully, without bloodshed. The middle class 'embraced the Republic' as a response to 'the disorientation of conservative elements', wrote José María Gil Robles, the principal architect of the Catholic and landowners' mobilisation against the republican reforms.[5]

The new government of the Republic was headed by Alcalá Zamora, an ex-monarchist, Catholic and man of order, a key piece in ensuring the necessary support for the regime of the more moderate republicans. As well as the Prime Minister, there were eleven ministers, including Alejandro Lerroux, leader of the main republican party, the *Partido Radical*, a centrist party despite its name; and Manuel Azaña, who headed the representation of the leftist republicans, and who became Minister of War. For the first time in Spain's history, socialists also took part in the government of the nation, with three

ministers: Fernando de los Ríos, as Minister of Justice; Indalecio Prieto in Finance; and Francisco Largo Caballero, Minister of Labour.

The map laid out for this government included a general election and providing the Republic with a Constitution. Elections with universal suffrage, both male and female, representative governments that answered to parliament, and compliance with the law and the Constitution were the distinguishing features of the democratic systems that were emerging or being consolidated at that time in the main countries of western and central Europe. And this is what the republicans and socialists who governed Spain tried to introduce during the early years of the Second Republic, to a large extent successfully.

The Constitution that emerged from Parliament after heated discussions, and which was passed on 9 December 1931, defined Spain as a 'democratic Republic of workers of all types, which is organised under a regime of liberty and justice'; it declared the secular nature of the State, did away with State financing of the clergy, introduced civil marriage and divorce, and banned religious orders from teaching. Article 36 granted the vote to women, something that was being done in the democratic parliaments of the most enlightened countries in that period. Once the Constitution was passed, Parliament elected Niceto Alcalá Zamora as President of the Republic, and Manuel Azaña, the leading light in the executive power, as Prime Minister and Minister of War.

From the arrival of the Republic in April 1931 until the removal of Azaña in September 1933, the coalition governments of republicans and socialists untertook the reorganisation of the Army, the separation of Church and State, and took radical and far-reaching measures concerning the distribution of agricultural land, the wages of the working classes, employment protection and public education. Never before had Spain experienced such an intense period of change and conflict, democratic advances or social conquests.

In its bid to consolidate itself as a democratic system, the Republic needed to establish the superiority of civil power over the Army and the Catholic Church, the two bureaucracies that exercised tight control over Spanish society. The Army that the Republic inherited in 1931 had a history that abounded with interventions in politics,

occupied a privileged position within the State and society, lacked modern armaments and was top-heavy with officers, many more than were necessary.

The reforms undertaken by Manuel Azaña in the Ministry of War, aimed at making a more modern and more effective army under the control of constitutional political power, was strongly resisted by a sector of the officer class, conservative politicians and the military media. There had already been a rattling of sabres in the summer of 1931, although the first attempts at conspiracy were neutralised by the government. A more serious matter was the military uprising in August 1932 led by General Sanjurjo, a hero of the Morocco campaign in the 1920s, which failed because he was unable to attract any major military garrison to his cause, except the one in Seville.

Sanjurjo was sentenced to death by a court-martial, although he was later pardoned; he went to live in Portugal, and from there, he led another *coup d'état* against the Republic, this time with fatal consequences, in July 1936. Many of the officers who accompanied him in this second uprising had been affected by the policy of reforms and promotions implemented by Azaña, who became the *bête noire* of a large sector of the army.

Similarly, establishing the supremacy of civil power called for a broad secularisation of society, and this brought the Republic into conflict with the Catholic Church. Article 26 of the Constitution stated that Church property was to be declared as belonging to the State, and barred religious orders from taking part in industrial and trading activities, as well as teaching. Although the implementation of this law banning teaching activities by religious orders was suspended when the socialists and leftist republicans lost the election in November 1933, republican legislation in religious matters reinforced still further the traditional identification in Spain of social order with religion.

As well as religion, land became one of the main centres of conflict during the Republic, in a country in which, despite industrial development and urban growth, agriculture still accounted for over half the economic output. There were very few medium-sized farms in Spain, but plenty of smallholdings and small estates in the north, and a predominance of large properties, with hundreds of

thousands of impoverished labourers in the south. Agricultural reform that would distribute land more fairly, while necessary, was perceived by the owners as an expropriatory revolution.[6]

Most of the laws drawn up by the republican-socialist coalition government and passed by Parliament during the early years of the Republic were moderate in practice, and in many cases unworkable, but they were threatening in principle. And those who did feel threatened by them very soon organised themselves to fight the Republic.

Against the republican reforms, anti-democratic postures and counter-revolution were advancing rapidly, and not only among the most influential sectors of society, such as businessmen, industrialists, landowners, the Church and the Army. After the first few months of disorganisation among the right, political Catholicism burst onto the republican scene like a whirlwind. The close link between religion and land ownership could be seen in the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of Catholic farmworkers, poor and 'extremely poor' landowners, and the almost total control wielded by landowners over organisations that were supposedly set up to improve the lot of these farmworkers. And here, money and the pulpit worked wonders: the former served to finance, among other things, an influential local and provincial press network; from the latter, the clergy took it upon itself to unite, more than ever, the defence of religion with that of order and ownership.

Dominated by large landowners and urban professionals, the *Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas* (Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right – CEDA), the first mass party in the history of the Spanish right, set itself up in February 1933 to defend 'Christian civilisation', combat the 'sectarian' legislation of the Republic and 'revise' the Constitution. It was the party that received the most votes in the election in November that year, and it governed with Alejandro Lerroux's centrist republicans between October 1934 and December the following year. During that time, the CEDA was unable to meet its goal of halting the march of reform and revising the Republic on a corporative basis. Victory in the February 1936 election, the third and last held during the Republic, went to the leftist *Frente Popular* coalition, and because of this defeat, the Catholic right and the Fascists, unable as they were to

win power by parliamentary means, agreed to consider the use of force as a response to the government and the Republic.

The Republic was also under threat from below, because there was a powerful anarcho-syndicalist movement in Spain, organised around the *Confederación Nacional de Trabajo* (National Labour Confederation – CNT), founded in 1910, which preferred revolution as an alternative to parliamentary government.[7] Some of the most hardline and radical groups of this movement initiated insurrections in January 1932 and January and December 1933, as a means of coercion against the established republican authority. Underlying these attempts at revolution, which were easily put down by the forces of order, was a rejection of the representative institutional system and the belief that force was the only way to eliminate class privilege and power abuse.

However, the history of the Republic shows that the use of force against the parliamentary regime was not limited to the anarchists; the democratic ideal did not seem to be deeply-rooted among certain republican politicians or socialists, and they mounted their first insurrection in October 1934, after being removed from power as a result of the general election the previous year. That revolution, which kept the republican authorities fully occupied for ten days in the mining region of Asturias, was put down leaving approximately 1,000 dead among those who supported the insurrection, some 2,000 wounded and 300 dead among the police and the army.

With this rebellion, the socialists who supported it showed the same condemnation of the representation system as the most radical anarchist groups had done in previous years. After their defeat in the November 1933 elections, the socialists broke with the democratic process and the parliamentary system as a means of rechannelling politics towards the reform projects of the first two years. The movement's leaders, at the instigation of the younger members, who formed militias and developed a taste for a military framework, tried to copy the Bolshevik model in Spain.

The police and Civil Guard,[8] as well as the army, were loyal to the government in all these attempts at insurrection by the left and there was no chance of them joining the revolutionaries or refusing to repress them. Against a State that kept its armed forces intact

and united, a revolutionary strategy based on scattered support could never spark widespread disruption and it ended up being easily put down. After the Russian example of 1917, where the army suffered tens of thousands of desertions following heavy defeats in the First World War, there were no successful workers' revolutions in Europe, except for the one led by Bela Kun in Hungary for a few months in 1919.

These revolts against the Spanish Republic, serious disruptions to public order that were put down amid a great deal of bloodshed by the armed forces of the State, made the Republic and its parliamentary system's survival much more difficult, but they did not bring down the Republic, let alone cause a civil war. After October 1934, the socialist movement tried to become democratically and politically active again, and win seats at the polls; this they did in February 1936, together with the republicans and other leftist parties who had joined forces to form the *Frente Popular*. In the months that followed these elections, the people of order felt more threatened than ever by the new thrust from the trade union organisations and social conflicts. A significant sector of the Army plotted against them and did not stop until the republican regime was overthrown. February 1936 saw free democratic elections; July 1936, a *coup d'état*.

WHY WAS THERE A CIVIL WAR IN SPAIN?

Between 1910 and 1931 various Republics, democratic regimes, or regimes with democratic aspirations, emerged in Europe, which replaced hereditary monarchies that had been established for centuries. Most of them, significantly those such as the German, Austrian and Czech republics, had been established as a result of their defeat in the First World War. The sequence had begun in Portugal, with the overthrow of the monarchy in 1910, and the Spanish Republic was the last to be proclaimed. The only example that survived as a democracy during those years until the outbreak of the Second World War was the Irish Republic, created in 1922. All the others were overthrown by counter-revolutionary military uprisings, authoritarian movements or Fascists. But the *coup d'état* of July

1936 was the only one that led to a civil war. And this difference needs to be explained.

Let us start with an obvious observation. Had it not been for the military uprising in July 1936, there would not have been a civil war in Spain. In view of the history of Europe during those years, and that of the other Republics that were unable to survive as democratic regimes, the Spanish Republic probably could not have survived either. But we shall never know for certain, because in this case the military uprising caused a split within the Army and the security forces. And by doing so, it meant that different armed groups competed to maintain power or conquer it.

The civil war came about because the military *coup d'état* failed to achieve its basic objective at the outset, which was to seize power and overthrow the republican regime, and because, unlike the events in other republics of the time, there was comprehensive resistance, both military and civil, to counter any attempt at imposing an authoritarian system. Had it not been for this combination of *coup d'état*, division of the armed forces and resistance, there would never have been a civil war.

Thus the civil war came about as a result of a military uprising, not unusual in view of the Army's tradition of intervening in politics and its privileged position within the State; this circumstance had been challenged by republican legislation, and the Army responded. This *coup d'état* met resistance because the Spanish society of 1936 was not the same as that of 1923, when the uprising in September of that year led by General Miguel Primo de Rivera was favoured by the general abstention of the Army, the weakness of the government, the apathy of public opinion and above all, the consent of King Alfonso XIII.

In 1936 there was a Republic in Spain, whose laws and measures had given it the historical opportunity to solve insurmountable problems, but it had also come across, and caused, major factors of instability, against which successive governments could not provide the proper resources to counteract. Against such a broad level of political and social mobilisation such as had been set up by the republican regime, the *coup d'état* could not end, as had occurred so many times in Spain's history, in a mere return to the old order,