The Second Republic (1931-1936)

The birth of the Second Republic was the key moment in modern Spanish history. The democratic project that the Republic was based on aroused great hopes in the nation. Nevertheless, five years later the country plunged itself into a gory civil war. The debate over the reasons for the failure of the Republic continues to be one of the most important debates in Spanish historiography today.

Puerta del Sol, Madrid, 14 April 1931

The Republic was declared on 14 April 1931. A Provisional Government was established. It was presided over by Niceto Alcalá Zamora and formed by Republicans of all political slants as well as socialists and nationalists. The government was supposed to rule over the country until the new “Cortes Constituyentes” (a parliament whose main goal was to pass a new constitution) gave shape to the new political regime.

The new government had to face a tense social environment. While the anarchist CNT promoted a widespread campaign of strikes, the most conservative wing of the Church clashed with the new government. The old sentiment of anticlericalism was flourishing once again and, in May 1931, various churches and convents were burned. The public opinion of the Catholic Church, which involved a significant number of Spaniards, distanced itself from the new republican regime.

In June of 1931, a republican-socialist coalition triumphed in the elections of the parliamentary Courts. The new Constitution, passed in December 1931, reflected the ideas of the majority of the parliament.
The constitution of 1931

The constitution of 1931 was the most progressive constitution that Spain had ever passed. It had the following main characteristics:

- **Popular sovereignty**: The sovereignty (power) resided in the people and the new state was declared as “democratic Republic of workers of all classes.”
- **Universal suffrage**: After a long, complex debate in the Courts, Spanish women obtained the right to vote for the first time in Spanish history. This established Spain as one of the first major European nations to grant women the right to vote or franchise.
- **An extensive declaration on rights and liberties**, including the following:
  - Freedom of meeting, association, and expression
  - Civil rights: divorce, the insurance of the equality of legitimate and illegitimate children
  - Right to education
- **Division of powers within the State**: Cortes (legislative power), Government (executive power) and Judicial (tribunals and courts). The President of the Republic had fairly limited powers playing a similar role to our current king.
- **For the first time in Spanish history**, regions were allowed to establish their own Home Rule (“Estatutos de Autonomía”)
- **Establishment of a secular state**: separation of church and state, which meant that the state stopped subsidizing the Catholic Church, and that the Church was prohibited to rule educational institutions and the absolute freedom of worship.

The Republican-Socialist two years (1931-1933)

A Republican-Socialist government presided over by Manuel Azañ, created a number of widespread reforms that tried to solve a series of problems that lingered on from the 19th century.

- **Social laws**: these laws improved the work conditions of labourers and strengthened the unions
- **Extensive educational reforms**: construction of almost 7,000 schools, co-education of boys and girls, and the end of religion as a mandatory subject taught in schools.
- **Military reform**: these reforms sought to guarantee the loyalty of the military to the new regime. The military had to choose, either to take an oath of loyalty to the Republican constitution or to retire with full pay.
- **The agrarian reform**: this reform attempted to redistribute the ownership of land by
permitting day labourers to become landowners. This greatly alarmed many landowners even though in practice very few plots of land were actually redistributed among day labourers.

- Devolution to Catalonia: the central government granted certain powers to the Catalan region by passing a Home Rule Law (Estatuto de Autonomía).

These reforms outraged the conservative opinion and again the military tried to take over power by a failed coup led by General Sanjurjo in 1932. At the same time, however, the reforms did not manage to live up to the hopes of the working classes.

In November 1933, in a context of the economic crisis that prevailed over the country (depression of 1930s), the government called for elections in which the conservative forces—such as the Lerroux’s Radical Party and Gil Robles’ Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right (Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas: CEDA)—came out on top.

**The Conservative two years (1933-1936)**

After the elections, Lerroux, leader or the Republican Radical Party formed a government that needed the parliamentary support of the CEDA, the main party on the right. The new executive initiated a new rectification policy to reverse the reforms from the previous two years:

- It stopped the agrarian reforms, with the consequent expulsion of the few day labourers who had occupied lands through these reforms.
- It halted the military reforms and promoted clearly anti-Republican figures into important military positions. These figures included Franco, Goded, and Mola.
- Political concessions to the Catholic Church
- The government confronted Catalan and Basque nationalism. It rejected a project of Basque Country home rule in 1934 and clashed with the Catalanian Generalitat, (Catalan regional government).

**The Revolution of October of 1934**

In a context of growing international tension -Hitler had just risen to power in Germany in 1933- the political confrontation reached levels that were difficult to sustain without the outbreak of some sort of conflict.

The entrance of some CEDA ministers into the government in 1934 brought the left to the point of rebellion. Most left-wingers considered the CEDA’s presence in the government as the preface to a victory of fascism, since the CEDA’s youth organization displayed an almost fascist propaganda in the country.
The ever-more radical left (PSOE, UGT, CNT the anarchist union, and the minority Communist Party or PCE) called for a general strike against the government.

The movement was a failure in most parts of the country. In Barcelona, Companys, from his post of president of the Generalitat, led an uprising with clear secession undertones. The rebellion was quickly repressed by the military.

The worst conflict occurred in Asturias, where the general strike succeeded and resulted in a real revolution organized by the UGT and the CNT. The uprising’s persistence led the national government to opt for a more brutal repression. The Legion, directed by Franco, was in charge of putting an end to the revolt.

![Revolutionary miners arrested in Asturias 1934](image)

The outcome of the October Revolution of 1934 was terrifying: there were 1,500-2,000 deaths, double the number of wounded, and 30,000 arrests made (among them were Companys and Azaña, who had not even supported the uprising, as well as the main leaders of the PSOE such as Prieto and Largo Caballero).

Shortly afterwards, various corruption scandals in 1935 led Lerroux’s government to call for another elections in February of 1936. Polls brought a win of the Popular Front (“Frente Popular”), a leftist coalition of parties, led by the Republican Manuel Azaña.

**The Popular Front (February-July 1936)**

The Popular Front, a coalition that brought together the forces of the left, won the elections of February 1936. The militant anarchist came out to vote in large numbers, which they had not done in 1933.

Manuel Azaña was named President of the Republic and formed a government which was presided over by Casares Quiroga and which consisted exclusively of leftist republicans. The most moderate sector of the new government was the Popular Front. Socialists and Communists remained excluded from the government.
The new government, after passing an amnesty of the thousands of prisoners detained in the aftermath of the 1934 uprising, resumed the political reforms of the first two years of the Republic. The new government brought back the agrarian reform, reestablished the Catalonian Home Rule, and they began the debate over new autonomy statutes of Galicia and the Basque Country.

Meanwhile, the social environment was becoming more and more tense. The workers on the left had taken on a more revolutionary slant and the right was seeking a way to carry out a military coup that would put an end to the democratic system. The moderates and the democrats were trying to maintain a constitutional and democratic regime but found that they were quite helpless in fighting the current that was carrying the country towards civil war.

From the month of April onwards, a number of violent clashes took place on the streets. Meanwhile, a great section of the military plotted against the Republic. The democracy lived its last few days in Spain.

**The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)**

The military coup (17-19 July 1936), led by Franco, was successful in taking control of some areas of the country, but key areas like Madrid, Catalonia and the Basque Country remained in the hands of the government of the Republic.

Amid a brutal repression, Spain was divided into two zones: the Republican zone (“zona republicana”), where the government tried to impose legal authority to workers' militia, and the Nationalist zone (“zona nacional”), where the military established a harsh dictatorship.

The war went through three major phases:

- July 1935-March 1937. With Hitler and Mussolini’s help, the military rebels managed to bring the army units located in Morocco to the peninsula. Important
sections of central and western Spain were caught by the rebels. However, Franco’s army failed in its attempt to take Madrid.

- April 1937-November 1937. Franco’s troops conquered the Northern strip still held by the Republicans and launched an offensive towards the Mediterranean Sea to break the Republican zone into two isolated sections.
December 1937-February 1939. The insurgent troops arrived at the Mediterranean Sea in Castellon. The last Republican offensive and the toughest battle of the war was the Battle of the Ebro in July-November 1938. The Republican loss at the Battle of the Ebro eliminated their hopes of winning the war, which ended with the capture of Catalonia and Madrid. The Spanish civil war ended on 1st April 1939.

The International Dimension of the Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War had some of the greatest international repercussions in the Twentieth Century. The Spanish conflict intersected both the strategic interests of the major world powers and the ideological commitment of the major political tendencies of the time. The fascist powers decided from the beginning of the conflict to provide substantial assistance to the rebels led by Franco. Mussolini and Hitler would not only achieve strategic benefits, with Italy continuing its policy of expanding into the Mediterranean and Germany gaining an ally who threatened the French rear, but also helped an ideological ally in its fight against the democratic systems and the Communist ideologies. Dictator Salazar’s Portugal also helped Franco from the outset of the war.

The USSR, on the other hand, was very clear from the beginning in its commitment to helping the Republic. Stalin not only faced the spread of fascism, but also pushed away from Soviet frontiers the geographical center of the conflict between the powers and moved Hitler’s interest away from USSR’s borders.

The great democracies had an attitude that we can define as one of the greatest diplomatic deceptions of the previous century. Britain was determined from the outset to remain neutral. The British government looked apprehensively at the extension of the German-Italian influence in the peninsula. This would compromise the British base in Gibraltar, which was a key point in connecting the empire to India. However, the revolutionary events that took place in the Republican zone removed the possibility of aiding the Republic from the mind of the British Conservative government. London’s government wanted to neither help Franco nor aid a possible revolutionary Spain. The French government, despite being a leftist one, just followed what London did.

Another good example of the reluctance of democracies to confront Hitler and Mussolini was the policy of the U.S. government. While the U.S. Congress approved the so-called Neutrality Act, which prevented the US government from aiding the Republic, President Roosevelt looked the other way when American oil companies sold fuel, a crucial resource, to Franco.

Finally, the French government, with British support, proposed a pact of non-intervention in the Spanish conflict: it stated that no material and no men would be sent to Spain to help
either side in the war. The so-called Committee of No Intervention was born and all major powers adhered to it.

The committee was a farce. While France and Britain abstained from helping the democratic regime in Spain, Hitler and Mussolini sent massive and decisive support to Franco. As a consequence, the only power that the Republican government could turn their eyes to was the USSR, which, inevitably, affected the internal evolution of events in the Republic in the favour of the Communists.

**Foreign Help**

The unequal foreign aid received by both sides was one of the factors behind the victory of the Nationalists.

The national side from the outset received a strong support from Hitler and Mussolini. After receiving air support to transport the Army of Africa to the peninsula, Mussolini sent seventy thousand Italian troops, ammunition and implements of war, while Hitler ordered the Condor Legion to significantly increase Franco’s air superiority. The collaboration with Portugal, though not decisive in the military field, allowed free passage of arms to Franco’s army through Portuguese territory. Finally, numerous Moroccan troops were integrated in Franco’s army and were often used as storm troops.

The only help the Republican side received from the democracies was the few weapons sent from France in the early days of the conflict. French aid was immediately severed after the signing of the Non-Intervention.

Soviet aid began to arrive in time to assist in the defense of Madrid in November 1936. Although this support was important, it was more scattered and of lower quality than the support received by Franco.

The International Brigades were formed by groups of volunteers. Although not all of them were Communists, a relevant number was recruited by the Communist International in many countries worldwide. They were forty thousand and played an important role in the defense of Madrid and in the battles of Jarama (1937) and Teruel (winter 1937-1938).

**Two or Three Spains? Social and Political Systems Confronted**

In Nationalist Spain, a stern military dictatorship was established from the beginning of the war under the absolute authority of Franco, Head of State since October 1936. In 1937, all political groups, mainly Falange (fascist party) and Tradicionalistas (Carlistas), were pooled in a single party, the Traditionalist Spanish Falange (Falange...
Española Tradicionalista, led, of course, by the “Caudillo”.

In the Republicans, who were the opponents to a military-fascist dictatorship in Spain, defended different political projects and sometimes experienced conflict among themselves. On the one hand, some defended a democratic system that was similar to the Western democracies, and on the other hand, some defended a social revolution.

Those who argued for a democratic republic (Republicans and moderate socialists) were overwhelmed by revolutionary positions, especially in the areas where the anarchists (CNT) prevailed.

The Communist Party was reinforced by the Soviet aid and the intervention of Stalin’s secret services. The infighting between different factions ended in armed clashes in Barcelona in May 1937. From that moment, the government of socialist Negrin, supported by communists, moderate socialists and republicans attempted to establish a centralized government. The task was impossible and division continued until the defeat.