Interwar Crises: The Case of Spain's Civil War

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ARTICLE SUMMARY

The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) was one of the defining events of the interwar period in Europe. When a group of military and civilian conspirators rose up against the legitimate Spanish government in July 1936, few could have predicted that their rebellion would develop into a long and bitter struggle, costing the lives of hundreds of thousands of Spaniards and setting the stage for one of the most durable dictatorships of the twentieth century. The rebelling forces, who were collectively known as Nationalists, were opposed by a diverse collection of leftist or “republican” factions. The ensuing clash between these opposing camps was largely defined along ideological lines. On the right, the Nationalists insisted that they were fighting a crusade (cruzada) to save traditional Spain from succumbing to a godless, communist dictatorship. The left was equally convinced of the righteousness of their cause. Outside of Spain, many saw the conflict as a contest that could possibly determine the balance of power in Europe. As a result, Spain’s war became a major source of concern for all the leading countries of the day.

When a military-led rebellion broke out in Spain in July 1936, it initially appeared to outsiders as a domestic struggle that would have little bearing on the course of European affairs. But following the direct intervention of foreign powers, such as Italy and Germany, Spain’s conflict acquired a much wider significance, one that would resonate both during the war and long after the conflict had ended in 1939. Because of this and the enormous impact this tragic event had on the course of modern Spanish history, the Civil War is widely regarded as one of the key events of the twentieth century.

From Military Rising to Civil War

The group of rebel officers and right-wing civilians who rose up against the Spanish Second Republic on July 17, 1936, were confident of an early victory. However, their attempt to seize power and establish a military directory met with only partial success. In pro-Republican cities, such as in Saragossa and Seville, the insurgents quickly gained the upper hand by moving quickly to control military garrisons and other strategic facilities, thereby preventing working-class organizations from mounting an effective response. Where the population was already predominantly anti-Republican, such as in the northern city of Pamplona—the rebels were greeted by enthusiastic crowds.

But in Madrid and other key cities, such as Barcelona and Valencia, the military rebellion was crushed by leftist workers, improvised popular militias, and the military and police forces who remained loyal to the Republic. Another major setback came when nearly two-thirds of Spain’s naval fleet declared their allegiance to the Republic. This unanticipated development not only prevented General Francisco Franco (1892–1975) from transporting his highly trained Army of the Africa from Morocco to the mainland but also led to the early internationalization of the conflict. Fearing that the rebellion may bog down without the support of his crack troops, Franco urgently appealed to both Italy and Germany for aid. By the end of July, transport planes sent by German leader Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) and Italian leader Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) assisted Franco in the first major airlift in modern warfare. Because their plans for achieving complete military control of Spain had failed, the insurgent generals, who were from the outset joined by an assortment of right-wing civilian groups, were forced to conduct a civil war against the legitimate Republican government.

The country then split into mutually hostile zones. The Republicans controlled the major urban and industrial zones as well as Spain’s considerable gold reserves, whereas their opponents, who soon began referring to themselves as Nationalists, held approximately one-third of the peninsula, including vast stretches of sparsely populated territory and farmland.

An unintended and unanticipated consequence of the military rising was that it unleashed a popular revolution of massive proportions. Because the rebellion had caused the partial—or, in some cases, complete—breakdown of formal government institutions, Spain’s revolutionary forces—as represented by the anarcho-syndicalists (CNT-FAI), left Socialists [the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party and the Unión General de Trabajadores (PSOE-UGT)] and the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM)—were presented with an opportunity of radically transforming society. The result was that one of the most profound and far-reaching social revolutions, the Russian Revolution of 1917, engulfed towns and villages scattered throughout Republican Spain.

The degree and intensity of these revolutionary experiments varied from place to place. But in regions where the anarcho-syndicalists were preponderant, the revolution embraced nearly all aspects of society. In some areas, money was completely abolished, church buildings were either destroyed or put to secular use, and everything—from cigarettes to luxury hotels—was considered public property. As a result of these changes, large swaths of Republican territory initially fell under the rule of worker committees and collectivist institutions.

Not all Republicans welcomed these revolutionary transformations. In the Basque country, for example, no revolution occurred. Instead, the conservative and mostly Catholic Basque organizations such as the Basque National Party (PNV) quickly assumed political and economic control of the region. Their opposition to the Nationalists, such as that of the Catalan nationalists who also aspired to self-rule within the framework of a liberal state system, was based on their desire to give full expression to their own cultural and political identities. Elsewhere in the Republican zone, a coalition consisting of the moderate Socialists of the PSOE, the middle-class Republican parties, and the Communists of the Partido Comunista de España (PCE) and the Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (PSUC) was also strongly opposed to revolutionary developments. In the immediate aftermath of the uprising, Republican representatives remained in charge of the Popular Front government despite real power that had devolved to the working-class organizations and civilian groups who had helped to put down the rebellion. Largely because they lacked any popular support, these...
middle-class parties soon stepped aside and allowed the Socialists and their political allies to take over the reins of government. Though some, such as the sixty-seven-year-old prime minister, Francisco Largo Caballero (1869–1946), were sympathetic to the revolution, the main objective of the new regime formed in September 1936 was to restore state authority throughout the Republican zone to prosecute the war more effectively. Of all the Republican parties, it was the Spanish Communists (the PCE and PSUC) who took the lead in defining the political agenda for the Republic. Above all, both inside Spain and abroad, they promoted the idea that the war was being fought to defend a democratic Republic against the menace of fascism. Their moderate message appealed to a wide audience, but particularly to the middle-class Republicans who felt threatened by the revolution.

Opening the Floodgates of Civil War

The early weeks of Spain’s civil war was characterized by a wave of terror that swept through both Republican and Nationalist camps. Though stemming in part from the pent-up passions of a politically and socially divided country, this terror also sprung from longstanding ideological differences. On the Republican side, the initial confusion caused by the breakdown of government authority led to terrorism and violence on an unprecedented scale. Known Falangists and other anti-leftists were primary targets, though innocent bystanders also fell victim to the street justice meted out in the heat of the moment. Although not officially sanctioned by the Popular Front government, the violence committed against suspected pro-Nationalists (also known as Fifth Columnists) living in the Republican zone persisted throughout the course of the war.

Perhaps the most shocking form of violence committed during the so-called Red Terror was the ferocious assault against the Catholic Church. Apart from sacking and burning churches, convents, and attacking religious monuments, a certain number of revolutionaries set about killing clergymen and women in what turned out to be the greatest clerical bloodletting in modern times. Close to seven thousand clergy fell victim to this virulent, and for many, incomprehensible form of revolutionary rampage.

The reign of violence on the Republican side was surpassed by the terrorism and political violence against civilians that occurred in the Nationalist camp. Even more so than their Republican counterparts, Nationalists relied on repression both as a means of securing recently conquered territory and for establishing their control over the daily life of the local population in the rearguard. Anarchists, Republicans, Communists, and anyone else whose political affiliation or personal lifestyle identified him as an enemy of the rebellion fell prey to these bloody purges. Among the many victims of Nationalist terror in Granada was the pro-Republican Federico García Lorca (1898–1936), one of Spain’s greatest literary talents. There can be no doubt that Lorca was executed, not just for his political beliefs, but because his homosexuality posed a threat to the traditional social code of behavior that was imposed by the right.

Although the sheer number of those killed by military authorities declined as the war progressed, executions became regularized under a military court system established behind the lines and continued for several years after the war ended in 1939.

The Republican Zone

At the beginning of the war, Republicans of all stripes rallied under the banner of the Popular Front. In the critical early days of fighting, this enabled pro-Republican forces to work together to bridge the deeper ideological and political divisions that had long separated them from one another. But because different Republican elements were striving toward different ends, the question arose as to how they could sustain a viable anti-fascist front. As they had done when faced with the task of organizing the military, the moderate Socialists, middle-class Republican parties, and the Communists chose to defend Republican Spain by conventional means. Guided by the belief that military recovery and internal efficiency relied on a centrally directed state—albeit adapted to wartime conditions—they set about reasserting the authority of the Popular Front government. For the anarcho-syndicalists (CNT-FAI) and revolutionary Marxists (POUM), establishing anti-fascist unity meant something altogether different. Placing great value in the constructive energies of a people in arms, the revolutionaries sought to unite the disparate elements of the Republic by consolidating this revolutionary movement along federal lines.

Yet another model of Republican Spain was envisaged by the Basque and Catalan separatists. Both wanted to defeat the Nationalists, but neither wanted to sacrifice their independence for the sake of a resurgent central government. Thus, even though they were more inclined than the revolutionaries to participate in a Madrid-led Popular Front coalition, their cooperation largely depended on the government’s ability to satisfy their respective demands for autonomy.
Nationalist Spain

The various insurgent forces that fought against the Republic came to be known as the Nationalists—a label that was used above all to imply the legitimacy of their movement. In contrast to the regional or separatist movements on the Republican side, nationalism on the right referred to a concept of Spain defined wholly by national institutions (such as the Catholic Church) and social practices (such as the Castilian language) that had been associated with Spain for centuries. Equally important in this connection was a consensus among the various Nationalist civilian parties about the need for achieving a military victory over their opponents above all other considerations. Thus, whereas not everyone shared the same vision of Spain’s political future, they all accepted the military’s leadership. This does not mean that the military could dispense entirely with civilian assistance. Groups such as the Carlist requetés and the Falangist militias had proved to be indispensable allies in the early stages of the conflict. Furthermore, the army relied on the activities of civilian organizations both to help them maintain public order and to oversee essential operations in the rearguard. The Falangist Feminist Section (Sección Femenina), for instance, was one of several women’s organizations that ran orphanages and soup kitchens and provided support for other vitally important auxiliary and social welfare programs.

Over the course of the war, the military greatly expanded its role. The first decisive step to consolidate military rule came with the creation of the National Defence Committee, which had been set up in late July to coordinate the Nationalist war effort. At the end of September 1936, the National Defence Committee decided to invest both military and political authority in General Franco. In the following months, he took further steps to consolidate his power, culminating in April 1937, when he decreed the amalgamation of all the Nationalist factions into a single party under his control, the Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las JONS (FET).

The institutional basis of Franco’s regime was not formally defined as “fascist,” though the main structures of his so-called estado nuevo incorporated many fascist ideas and organizational principles. For example, the Trade Union Unity Act (TUUA) passed in 1938 and was closely patterned after the Labor Charter earlier adopted in Mussolini’s Italy. Not all aspects of Franco’s state conformed to the fascist model. A major pillar of the regime both during and following the war was the Catholic Church. More than any other single institution, the Catholic Church embodied the beliefs and values of the Nationalists, most of whom followed Bishop Enrique Plá y Daniel (1876–1968) and other church officials in portraying the Civil War as a crusade against the godless enemies of the spiritual Spain that they were defending.

Franco’s efforts to unify the Nationalist movement greatly benefited from the relative economic stability that his side enjoyed throughout the war. Much of Franco’s war was underwritten by economic arrangements with Italy, Germany, and capitalist concerns, such as Texas Oil (Texaco) and Firestone who provided supplies on credit. Territorial gains also strengthened the Nationalists’ economy. Besides possessing the greater part of Spain’s food-producing regions, they controlled much of the country’s mineral resources. All of this had a stabilizing effect on Nationalist social and political affairs, which allowed Franco to devote his full attention to the conduct of war on the battlefields.

Military Engagements: 1936–1938

The first six months of war saw a series of Nationalist victories in nearly every corner of the country. In the far north, the city of Irun fell to the rebels on September 5, and further inroads were made in the Basque country that same month. The Nationalists also advanced on other fronts, most notably along the Guadarrama front (north of Madrid), on the Castilian plains toward Toledo, and in the south and southwestern regions. More than anything else, however, the Nationalists were determined to take Madrid, and they were convinced that once it was captured, the war would be effectively over. By early September, this appeared inevitable to both Nationalists and Republicans. However, because General Franco decided to divert his forces to the city of Toledo in order to liberate besieged Nationalist supporters from the renowned Alcázar fortress, the momentum of the Nationalists’ drive to take the capital was greatly diminished. As a result, the citizens of Madrid, reinforced by the arrival of the celebrated International Brigades and fresh
supplies from the Soviet Union, managed to thwart Franco’s troops when they finally arrived in early November. Nationalist efforts to cut off the city from the rest of Republican Spain also proved futile. In the early months of 1937, Nationalist offensives that launched near Jarama (in February) and Guadalajara (in March) were successfully repelled by Republican forces. In the latter case, the Republicans scored what turned out to be their only victory during the war: some 35,000 newly organized military units managed to defeat the poorly coordinated Nationalist and Italian troops (called the Black Shirt Divisions) who had advanced into Guadalajara and the surrounding area.

Not deterred by these setbacks, the Nationalists soon resumed their advances elsewhere on the peninsula. At the end of March, a major assault was launched in the northern provinces that were physically cut off from the rest of Republican Spain. This offensive marked a particularly controversial phase of the fighting when it became apparent that the Nationalists relied on German and Italian fighter planes to bomb civilian populations. The firebombing and consequent near destruction of the historic Basque town of Gernika (Guernica) in April proved to be one of the most widely publicized episodes of the Civil War. Two diversionary Republican counteroffensives on the Madrid front in the months of May and June failed to stem the Nationalists’ relentless drive to conquer the north. The well-fortified Basque city of Bilbao was attacked and then occupied in June, and, by late autumn, the remnants of the Republican-held northern zone fell into Nationalist hands.

After nearly one and a half years of fighting, it had become evident that the balance of the war had shifted decisively in the Nationalists’ favor. Despite improvements in the fighting capacity of the Republic’s Popular Army, Republican forces proved time and again incapable of defeating the Nationalists on the battlefield. This was demonstrated at Teruel (December through January in 1937), where battle-hardened Republican troops failed to capitalize on their initial successes against the enemy, and at Ebro (July through November in 1938), which was the last major Republican offensive of the war. When defeat came in November, the Republican army was at the point of collapsing. For the remainder of the Civil War, the Nationalists were all but assured of securing a triumphant military victory.

**Foreign Arena and Intervention**

To understand the international response to the Spanish Civil War, it is necessary to bear in mind the fear of another general European war that informed much diplomatic behavior, especially in France and Britain. Another factor informing the diplomatic behavior of Western powers at this time was their exaggerated fear of communism. Particularly during the 1930s, this deeply rooted anxiety blinded them to the real menace posed by the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany and the growing popularity of right-wing dictatorships across much of Europe.

For Great Britain and France, the belief that Spain’s war may possibly exacerbate social tensions at home and, worse, spill over into the general European arena, carried the most weight in their joint decision to pursue a policy of nonintervention. In Britain, the conservative-dominated National government was above all interested in protecting British strategic and economic interests in an increasingly volatile situation of whether France or not to become involved in the Spanish situation was complicated by the pro-Republican sentiments of the Popular Front government headed by Léon Blum (1872–1950), although these yielded in the face of domestic political concerns and the absence of British support. Worried that France may find itself isolated at a time when its major rivals, Germany and Italy, were gaining strength, Blum decided to embrace nonintervention as the lesser evil.

There was only one multilateral effort aimed at blocking foreign involvement in Spain. Acting on the assumption that the Civil War could trigger a larger European conflict, British and French diplomats urged all nations to adopt a hands-off policy. Under their initiative, a Non-Intervention Agreement (NIA) was signed by twenty-seven countries in August 1936. One month later, a Non-Intervention Committee (NIC) was set up in London, which was meant to give some teeth to the NIA. But given that the NIC was virtually powerless to stop any country from interfering in Spain’s affairs, the British-French policy of nonintervention was condemned from the outset to futility.

Prior to the July rebellion, Germany had not paid much attention to Spanish affairs. Shortly after civil war had erupted, however, Hitler decided to send military assistance to the Nationalists’ anti-Bolshevik crusade. But his decision to aid Franco was based on more than just ideological considerations. Above all, the troubles brewing in Spain provided a much welcomed distraction that would give Germany the leeway it needed to pursue its expansionist plans in Asia and eastern Europe. Besides the transport planes and fighters they had delivered to Franco at the beginning of the war, the Germans also sent fighter pilots and specialists needed to operate and maintain the equipment that they supplied to the Nationalists. By late October, Nationalist fighters in Berlin decided to formalize their air combat role in Spain by officially forming the Condor Legion. As the war progressed, the Condor Legion provided tactical support for ground troops and enabled the Nationalists to achieve air superiority, which was a factor that turned the tide in numerous campaigns fought in the last year and a half of the war.

Mussolini decided to intervene for a variety of political and pragmatic reasons. By helping a pro-fascist movement, he hoped to limit French influence in Spain while at the same time strengthening the Italians’ presence in a vital part of the Mediterranean. Mussolini was also convinced that the future of Italian interests was bound up with its image as an aggressive power. Demonstrating Italy’s growing military capability could only enhance the forceful image that Mussolini sought to cultivate. In fact, it was during the Civil War that Italy began to draw closer to Germany, which forged a bond that first took shape with the Rome-Berlin Axis alliance concluded in November 1936.

Spain’s unexpected civil war was not at first viewed as being of great importance to the Soviet Union, not least because Moscow, like many other foreign governments, believed that the conflict would be a short one. But when it became apparent that both Germany and Italy were helping to prolong the conflict, the Soviets could no longer afford to ignore the Spanish situation. Stalin’s decision to intervene on the Republican side was conditioned by two major considerations. From an ideological standpoint, Stalin recognized that, in order to live up to its role as the world’s leading socialist country, the Soviet Union was obliged to lend its support to an anti-fascist cause. A more pragmatic motive, however, was that the Republic would yield diplomatic dividends. Stalin reasoned that it was in the Soviet Union’s best interest to intervene in Spain if this meant forging stronger ties with Western liberal democracies that also felt threatened by the spread of fascism.

Soviet assistance came in the form of armaments and military advisors. Because they became the major supplier and distributor of arms and military equipment to Republican Spain, the Soviets and their Communist allies attained a commanding position in Republican political and military affairs. Over the course of the war, Communist commanders and Soviet military advisors increasingly determined military priorities and their preponderance throughout the infrastructure of the International Brigades, and the Republic’s Popular Army made them indispensable for every major military operation carried out between 1937 and the end of the war.

Both the United States and most Latin American countries refused to be drawn into a foreign adventure. In the latter case, only Mexico decided to send modest amounts of aid to the Republicans, whereas the rest of Spanish-speaking Latin America chose to ignore Spain’s dilemma. While US president Franklin Roosevelt (1882–1945) and his liberal administration tended to be sympathetic to the Republican cause, they were unwilling to risk US intervention. Overcoming the entrenched isolationist mood of the country was certainly one of them. Given that Spain was not widely viewed as being of great economic or political importance to the United States, the pro-interventionists faced a Herculean task to convince the general public that their country should get involved in Spanish affairs. In view of these stumbling blocks, the United States decided to enforce an arms embargo on Spain, although, significantly, this policy dovetailed with both Great Britain’s and France’s efforts to seal off the Spanish conflict.
Contrasting Cultures in the Two Spains

The Civil War also pitted opposing cultures against one another. In many ways, including their profoundly differing views on gender, religion, and interpersonal relations, Republican cultural life stood in stark contrast to that being promoted in the Nationalist camp. From the outset of the war, Nationalist leaders made it clear that they sought to construct a conservatively defined social agenda, one which was defined by male authorities as well as by the teachings of the Catholic Church. For example, representatives of the church instructed married women to aspire to the role of the perfecta casada, the loving and self-sacrificing wife who is devoted to her husband and children. Liberal practices associated with the Second Republic—which had granted women greater rights and social freedoms—were prohibited by the Nationalists. This was not least because, under Franco's rule, the primary duties of mothers and wives were to reproduce and to maintain the stability of the family.

Despite being identified as the defenders of women's rights, Republicans themselves were divided over the gender question. Activist Republican women were grouped into various types of competing political organizations, and each reflected a distinctive set of values and beliefs regarding women's issues. Middle-class women tended to express their feminism as a struggle for greater political and legal rights, whereas working-class women—such as the anarchist Mujeres Libres (or "Free Women")—rejected both the practices and ideas associated with the liberal feminist cause. Ethno-nationalism provided yet another dividing line among female groups. Women who identified themselves as Catalan separatists, for example, saw their struggle for women's rights through the lens of political nationalism.

Whatever their political viewpoints or affiliations may have been, the fact is that Republican women were unable to significantly alter the traditional boundaries of gender relations. This was not least because most female-led groups never challenged male hegemony in cultural and political affairs by establishing autonomous bodies that set their own agendas. Instead, most deferred to the male-dominated unions and party structures. In practice, the subordination of female organizations to the male hierarchy meant that the strategies of women's groups were more concerned with politics than with gender issues per se. As a result, little progress was made during the war toward achieving the full political and social emancipation of women in society.

Power Struggles in the Republican Zone

The Spanish Civil War was defined by political events behind the front lines as much as by military campaigns. The dynamics of Republican politics revolved around three major axes. The first centered on the spontaneous revolutionary movement that was triggered by the July rebellion. The second was connected to the pronounced regionalist movements in the Basque and Catalan regions. Pulling in yet another direction were the antirevolutionary forces that sought to impose their own political agenda throughout the Republican zone.

The popular or July revolution spearheaded by the anarcho-syndicalists and (to a lesser extent) the anti-Stalinist POUM was certainly one of the most striking episodes of the Spanish Civil War. In its early stages, the revolution moved with such velocity that it often blurred political borders that had formerly divided the Spanish left. The breadth and scope of collectivization varied from region to region. In parts of Aragón, the Levante, and Barcelona, for example, where the shockwaves of the revolution reverberated the loudest, the collectives embraced both agricultural and industrial enterprises. Farms, candy shops, bakeries, barbershops, the cinema, theaters, automobile plants, restaurants, transportation facilities, and even public utilities were, in varying degrees, taken over and then administered by radical worker committees. Given that many of these economic experiments were short lived and in view of the difficulties they faced in overcoming wartime hardships, it is hardly surprising that most collectives failed to achieve the libertarians' utopian goal of bringing about social harmony and economic prosperity for Spain's most downtrodden classes.

Regional Issues

Because they had been almost immediately physically cut off from the rest of Republican Spain and (in some cases) from each other, the Basque country, Santander, and Asturias were particularly vulnerable to the Nationalists. From July 1936, until it fell to the Nationalists in June 1937, the political and economic environment of the Basque country bore little resemblance to that elsewhere in Republican Spain. At the beginning of the war, an alliance of the conservative Basque National Party (PNV)—the preponderant party in the region—Socialists, Communists, and other Republicans had prevented any serious outbreak of violence against church property and the clergy and had also acted as a brake on any attempts at collectivization. With the passage of the Basque statute of autonomy in October and the ascent of the ardent nationalist, José Aguirre (1904–1960), as president, the PNV quickly asserted a commanding influence over the course of events. For the short period of its existence, the Basque government managed to preserve much of the prewar pattern of daily life. Churches remained open and businesses, though subject to wartime conditions, operated as usual.

However, the relative isolation of the Basque government meant that their achievement would be short lived. The weaknesses of the Basque military forces were fully exposed in the spring of 1937, when the Nationalists launched a major offensive in the region. Their efforts to destroy Basque resistance were highlighted by one of the most controversial episodes of the Civil War. On April 26, 1937, a fleet of German and Italian bombers destroyed the small town of Guernica. Their ruthless attack on an undefended city provoked a scandal of international proportions. More famously, the tragic bombing of Guernica inspired the renowned Spanish artist, Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), to immortalize the town's victims in his celebrated Guernica mural (June 1937), arguably the most iconic antiwar painting produced during the twentieth century. Not long after this bombing, the capital of the Basque country, Bilbao, was overrun by Nationalist forces. Its fall effectively ended the brief experiment in Basque independence.

The July revolution and the Civil War allowed Catalonia to experience greater autonomy than could be found anywhere else in the Republican zone. Toward the end of September, the Catalan government (Generalitat) was strong enough to reassert its authority in the region. While this development did not signal an end to the revolutionary movement, it did give greater rein to the regionalists, who pressed hard to erect the institutional basis for a Catalan nation. By the end of December, the Generalitat had already raised its own army, begun issuing its own currency notes, and begun promoting its own foreign relations with other countries. Although Catalonia was never in a position to secede from the Republic, its highly developed autonomy often compelled the central government to treat the Generalitat as an ally rather than as a regional government under its sovereignty.

In late 1936, the political tensions in Catalonia that had been building for months reached the boiling point during the so-called “May Events,” a “war within a war” (Orwell 1980) so vividly captured in George Orwell's autobiographical Homage to Catalonia. This bloody four-day incident, which involved running street battles between radical worker organizations and the backers of the regional and national government authorities, ended in defeat for the revolutionaries.

From this point on, the central government was ruled by the moderate elements who sought to centralize power by opposing the centrifugal pull of regionalism and revolution. The administration of the new premier, Juan Negrín (1892–1956), marked a departure from the previous regime in that he wanted to reverse the tide of the war by using the machinery of the state to reanimate the Republican war effort. To achieve this, he did not hesitate to ally with the Communists in order to clamp down on the revolutionary forces on the left. Because he realized the extent to which Republican Spain relied on Soviet assistance to conduct its war effort, Negrín was loath to curb Communist power and influence. In the end, this cost Negrín the good will of many Republicans, who increasingly saw him as a pawn of Communist interests.

The Casado Coup and Nationalist Victory

The Casado Coup and Nationalist Victory
The Republicans’ defeat at Ebro in November 1938 paved the way for the Nationalists’ final drive toward complete military victory. By January, the Nationalists were poised to conquer Catalonia. This invasion, as well as the occupation of Barcelona at the end of January, sparked a mass exodus of tens of thousands of civilians and soldiers. Elsewhere there were unmistakable signs of Republican defeat. By March, the last Republican stronghold, was left hopelessly surrounded by a sea of Nationalists. It was against this background of deteriorating conditions that an anti-Communist group of Socialists, anarchists, and Republican military officers, led by Colonel Segismundo Casado (1893–1968), the commander of the Army of the Center, decided to stage a coup against the Communist-dominated government. Anxious to put an end to what they saw as the senseless sacrifice of lives, this group believed that Franco would be ready to negotiate with them rather than with the pro-Communist government. However, it immediately became apparent that Franco had no interest in accepting their conditions for surrender. On March 27, Nationalist troops began to occupy the desolate streets of the city. The silence that greeted their initial entry was finally broken by the cheers of their Fifth columnist supporters and the chants of the war-weary citizens who were relieved that the war was coming to an end. A few days later, on April 1, 1939, Franco proclaimed that his troops had achieved their objectives. Spain’s thousand-day war was finally over.

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