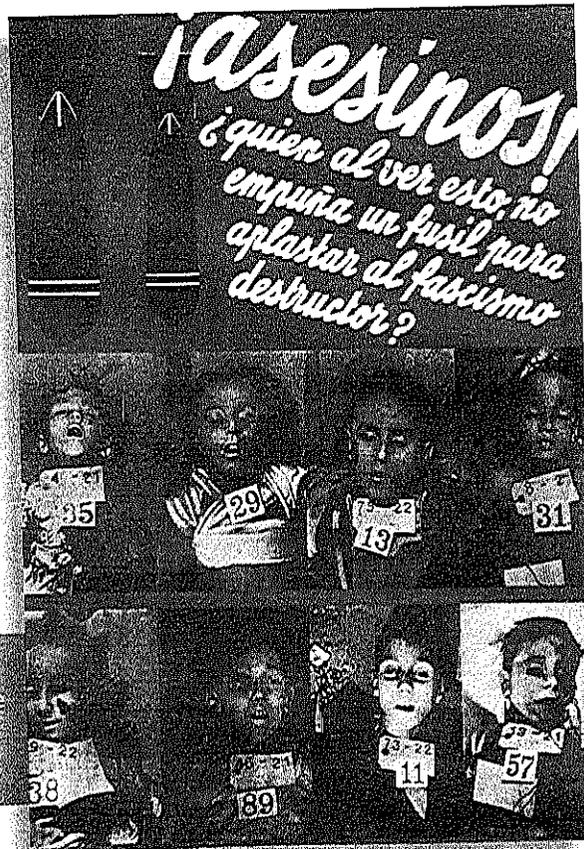


This 1937 republican poster shows eight children killed during a nationalist air raid on Madrid; it says: 'Murderers! Who, on seeing this, won't seize a gun to crush the fascist destroyers?'

Who makes this Spanish Republic propaganda poster?



What were the causes of the Spanish Civil War?

There were several reasons that civil war broke out in Spain in 1936. Some of these were short-term, but others can be traced back to the 19th century and beyond.

Spain before 1931

The Spanish élites

By 1900, the political system in Spain was based on an alliance between the monarchy, the army, the landowning aristocracy and the Catholic Church. These élites opposed any modernisation or reform that undermined their privileged position, influence and interests. However, after 1917, many workers and farm labourers in Spain were encouraged to challenge these élites by the success of the Bolshevik

After several years of unrest, in September 1923 a military coup led by **Miguel Primo de Rivera** overthrew the parliamentary government in Spain, and Rivera established himself as dictator. The Spanish élites supported Rivera's dictatorship, believing that a strong leader was needed to suppress the working classes and restore order. The king, **Alfonso XIII**, did not approve of a constitutional monarchy, and had frequently come into conflict with the parliamentary government of Spain. As a result, the king gave the new dictatorship legitimacy by officially making Rivera prime minister.

Miguel Primo de Rivera (1870–1930) Rivera was an aristocrat and military officer who seized power in a military coup after years of political protests, strikes, revolts and economic decline. He promised to eliminate corruption and to suppress the left-wing unrest. To achieve this, he suspended the constitution, established martial law and imposed a strict system of censorship. The Great Depression affected Spain badly and, in January 1930, Rivera resigned.

Alfonso XIII (1886–1941) Alfonso became king of Spain the day he was born, as his father had died a few months earlier. He supported Rivera's coup in 1923, and appointed him prime minister. When Rivera resigned in 1930, Alfonso established another military government. Although he left Spain in April 1931, after the declaration of the Second Republic, Alfonso never formally renounced the throne. He supported the nationalists in the civil war, but after Franco won he would not permit Alfonso to return as king.

The Catholic Church in Spain was a strong supporter of the monarchy. Much more conservative than in other European countries, the Church was closely identified with the privileged and wealthy classes. It also had almost total control over education, but it paid little attention to literacy, and secondary education was limited in Spain. These factors contributed to the rise in discontent among the Spanish people, and affected the Church's influence over the masses. In the south in particular, landless peasants turned away from the Church and towards atheism and anarchism (see page 133). At the same time, industrial workers grew increasingly attracted to socialism and even communism.

The army, dominated by the conservative and aristocratic élites, upheld the monarchy and the political system. After Rivera's coup, the army ruthlessly suppressed any protests or uprisings and, like the Church, it came to be widely despised by Spaniards. While the lower classes faced a range of social and economic problems such as poverty and poor standards of education, the Spanish élites flourished under Rivera's dictatorship and regarded this period as a 'golden age'.

Economic and social conditions

Even before the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the resulting Great Depression, the Spanish economy was underdeveloped compared to the economies of most European countries. Modern industry only began to appear in Spain in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and even then it tended to be limited to the north and north-east of the country. There was an important coal-mining industry in Asturias, and a steel industry in the Basque region in the north, while Catalonia had a significant textile industry. However, wages and working conditions were poor, as were living conditions. There was no welfare system for the unemployed, injured or sick.

By 1929, more than half the population of Spain still worked on the land – often in terrible poverty. This was especially true in regions such as Andalusia in the south, where farming was controlled by the owners of large estates known as *latifundia*. These landowners employed landless labourers on a daily basis, and many of these workers lived in conditions of near-starvation.

Political developments

These issues led to significant political divisions and bitter struggles in Spain, and as a result there were frequent civil conflicts. Spain was (and still is) a country that is greatly divided, geographically and linguistically. Two regions in particular had strong nationalist aspirations: the Basque country in the north and Catalonia in the north-east. Basque nationalism developed considerably in the early 20th century, but was largely repressed before 1931. In Catalonia, too, there began to be separatist demands for autonomy (self-rule) in the early 20th century.

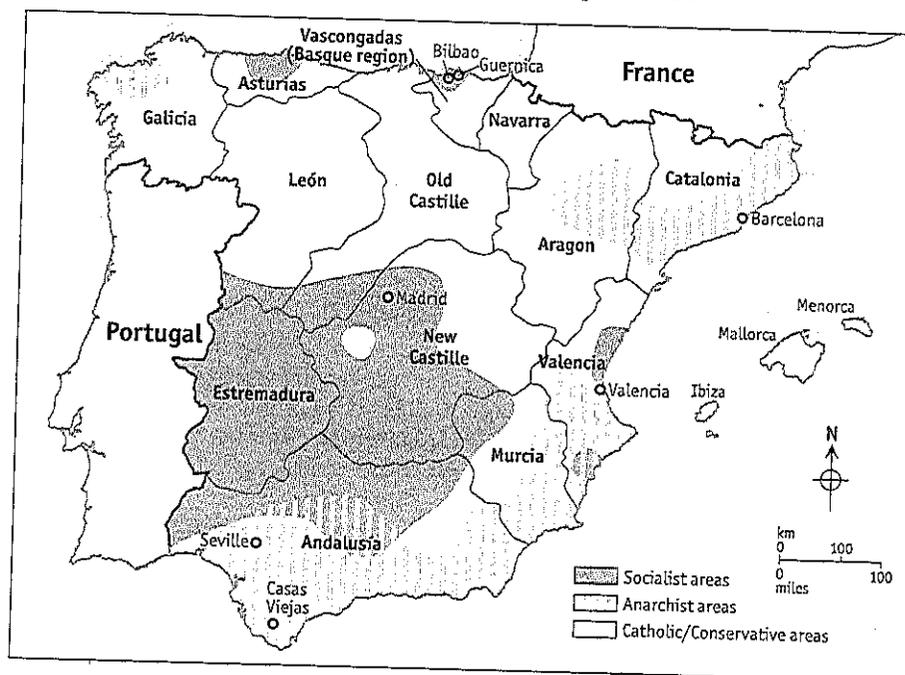
Activity

Carry out some additional research on the different regions of Spain. Then write a couple of paragraphs to explain why separatist movements were particularly strong in the Basque region and in Catalonia.

Revolutionary political movements that challenged the élites and the old order had existed in Spain for some time. The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) was formed in 1879, and in 1888 it founded a national trade union, the Union General de Trabajadores (General Workers' Union, UGT). Support for socialism grew after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, and in 1920 the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) was formed, although this was much smaller than the PSOE.

The rise of anarchism – in particular a revolutionary left-wing type of anarchism known as anarcho-syndicalism – was also significant. In 1910, anarchists set up their own national trade union, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Workers, CNT), which became a powerful rival to the socialist-dominated UGT. Rivera banned anarchist organisations in the 1920s, but in 1927 the more militant anarchists formed the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (Spanish Anarchist Federation, FAI). The FAI gained increasing influence within the CNT and, after 1931, anarchist groups strongly re-emerged.

A map showing the regional and political divisions in Spain in 1931



The Second Republic 1931-35

The short-term causes of the Spanish Civil War arose between 1931 and 1936. Rivera resigned in 1930 and in his place Alfonso XIII appointed another military dictator. However, in the troubled economic climate the king himself was losing support, and calls for a republic grew louder. Local elections were held in April 1931, in which republican and socialist parties made sweeping gains. A Second Republic was declared to replace the monarchy, and Alfonso fled the country. A provisional government was established to maintain control until a new constitution could be drawn up.

The left and reform 1931–33

The new Spanish republic was formed by a coalition of four parties that spanned the political spectrum: the PSOE (see page 132), the Partido Acción Republicana (Republican Action Party), the Partido Republicano Radical (Radical Republican Party) and the conservatives. In the national elections held in June 1931, these parties won a large majority and the conservative Niceto Alcalá Zamora was made prime minister. However, it soon became clear that there were serious differences of opinion over policy between the various members of the coalition, and Zamora resigned in October 1931. He was replaced by **Manuel Azaña**.

Manuel Azaña (1880–1940) Azaña was a wealthy lawyer. In 1926, he and José Giral founded the Partido Acción Republicana, a group largely made up of middle-class progressives. Azaña became prime minister of the new Spanish republic after Zamora resigned, and continued in that post after the new constitution was approved in December 1931, thus becoming the first prime minister of the Second Republic. In 1934, Azaña founded the Izquierda Republicana (Republican Left), and became president in May 1936, just before the civil war broke out. After Franco's victory, Azaña fled to France.

The new constitution was finally agreed in December 1931. Right from the start, though, several of its provisions worried conservative members of government, in particular its call for a 'democratic republic of workers'. By the new constitution, women were allowed to vote for the first time, and new laws on marriage and divorce were introduced that were the most advanced in Europe at the time. However, the main areas targeted for reform at the start of the Second Republic were the army, the Church, the treatment of workers and regional autonomy:

- The number of army officers and Spain's military budget were both reduced. These steps angered many in the military, who believed that the army was Spain's main defence against internal 'enemies'.
- Church and state were separated, and plans were made to close all religious schools. Such reforms, and unofficial anti-clerical actions in some regions, alienated most Catholics.
- During April–July 1931, decrees established the eight-hour working day and overtime pay. Small tenant farmers were protected against unfair evictions.
- In the 1931 local elections, Catalan separatists won a sweeping victory and proclaimed a totally independent Catalan Republic. In September 1932, the Catalan Statute officially restored a large measure of autonomy for Catalonia.

SOURCE

Before 1931, social, economic and political power in Spain had all been in the hands of the same groups, the components of the reactionary coalition of landowners, industrialists and bankers ...

However, the establishment of the Republic meant that for the first time political power had passed from the oligarchy to the moderate left ... Together, they saw themselves using state power to create a new Spain. However, to do so required a vast programme of reform which would involve destroying the reactionary influence of the Church and the army, more equitable industrial relations, breaking the near feudal powers of the *latifundio* estate-owners and meeting the autonomy demands of Basque and Catalan regionalists ...

Ultimately, then, the Spanish Civil War was to grow out of the efforts of the progressive leaders of the Republic to carry out reform against the wishes of the most powerful sections of society.

Preston, P. 2006. *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge*. London, UK. Harper Perennial. pp. 38–40.

Unrest and repression

It was not long before the Second Republic faced opposition from both left and right. Those on the political right strongly opposed rights for women and workers as well as the introduction of secular education and regional autonomy.

Anarchists and socialists were angered by the government's failure to enforce its reforms against the old élites – the landowners, industrialists, the army and the Church – in any meaningful way. Left-wing groups organised strikes and called for revolution, but the government responded harshly, using the army and the Civil Guard (a paramilitary police force) to suppress these rebellions.

In January 1933, farmers in Cadiz province – angry at the slow pace of reform and inspired by anarchist actions elsewhere – killed some Civil Guards and began an uprising in the town of Casas Viejas. The authorities sent in reinforcements, including the Assault Guards, which had been formed in 1931 to deal with urban unrest. The Guards set houses on fire, and many people were burned alive; 20 of the rebels were eventually shot – some after prolonged torture. Such acts of repression disillusioned many workers and landless peasants.



The aftermath of the massacre at Casas Viejas in January 1933

In February 1933, the growing unrest led to the formation of the Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas (Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right, CEDA). CEDA was a coalition of right-wing parties, under the leadership of **José María Gil Robles**. Its purpose was to defend religion, property rights and national unity, and the group gained considerable financial backing from landowners and industrialists, who hoped that CEDA would win the elections and reverse Azaña's reforms. Another significant development in right-wing extremism in 1933 was the formation of the fascist group the Falange Española (Spanish Falange) by Rivera's son, José Antonio.

José María Gil Robles (1898–1980) Gil Robles was the leader of Acción Nacional, which was later renamed Acción Popular. He later formed CEDA, which won the elections in 1933. However, Zamora chose Alejandro Lerroux as prime minister of the new government instead of Gil Robles, although he later served as minister of war. When the civil war began, Robles authorised the donation of CEDA funds to the nationalists. He dissolved the organisation in 1937.

By autumn 1933, disagreements within the coalition caused the socialists to stop all efforts at co-operation with the republicans. As a result, Zamora dismissed the government, and ordered an election to be held in November.

The reaction of the right 1934–35

Although CEDA won a sweeping victory in the November 1933 elections, Zamora overlooked its leader Gil Robles and instead asked **Alejandro Lerroux**, the leader of the Radical Republicans, to form a government.

Alejandro Lerroux (1864–1949) The strongly anti-clerical Lerroux formed the Radical Republican Party in 1908. During the period of Rivera's dictatorship, Lerroux's party was weakened when many members left to form the Radical Socialist Republican Party in 1929. Lerroux was prime minister of Spain three times between 1933 and 1935 – once as part of the centre-left coalition, and twice following the electoral victory of the right in November 1933.

Over the next two years – known to the left as the *bienio negro* ('two black years') – the Radical Republicans and their CEDA allies reversed most of Azaña's reforms. Lerroux allowed religious schools to continue; he also repealed several laws granting rights and protection to industrial and agricultural workers, and he cut wages significantly. The UGT (see page 132) called a general strike in protest, but this was crushed by the Civil Guard. In October 1934, Gil Robles forced Lerroux to form a coalition government that contained three CEDA ministers.

During this period of growing political polarisation, the Socialist Party began to adopt a more revolutionary position, believing that Gil Robles favoured an authoritarian, even fascist, government in Spain. The socialist **Largo Caballero** called for an armed uprising to oppose the increasing power of the right. An even stronger right-wing backlash triggered violent left-wing action in Catalonia and Asturias.

Largo Caballero (1869–1946) From 1925, Caballero was leader of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and of the UGT. From 1931–33, he was minister of labour relations under Zamora and Azaña. After the CEDA victory in November 1933, Caballero moved to the left, and headed the Marxist wings of the PSOE and UGT. He supported the workers' armed uprising of 1934 and, between September 1936 and May 1937, he was prime minister at the head of the Popular Front. Caballero was forced to resign after the May Days, in which republican factions in the civil war fought each other in the streets of Barcelona.

The rebellion in Catalonia was not well organised, and was soon crushed. However, the uprising in Asturias – one of the most industrialised parts of Spain – was much more serious. Asturias was a key coal-mining region, and mine owners had responded to the impact of the Great Depression by drastically cutting wages, increasing working hours and sacking many labourers.

Encouraged by the calls for revolution, left-wing groups began an armed uprising on 5 October 1934. Within a few days, they had overcome the Civil Guard and established control over most of the province. Lerroux responded by sending more than 20,000 troops to Asturias, while the navy and air force bombed towns and villages in the region. After two weeks of bitter fighting, the rebels were defeated by the army – under the command of General **Francisco Franco**. However, the violence did not end there, as the military immediately began a campaign of savage reprisals.

Francisco Franco (1892–1975) Franco was an army officer and a supporter of Rivera's dictatorship. He strongly opposed the reforms introduced at the start of the Second Republic, and after Generals Sanjurjo and Mola were killed in two separate plane crashes in 1936 and 1937, Franco became the leader of the army's nationalist revolt. Although he was not a member of the Falange before 1939, Franco still took the title *caudillo* ('leader') – similar to the titles used by Mussolini and Hitler. After his success in the Spanish Civil War, Franco ruled Spain as an authoritarian leader until his death in 1975.

Interwar Years: Conflict and Cooperation 1919–39

Final steps to war 1935–36

The repression of the Asturias uprising convinced many on the left that they needed to join forces in a coalition to challenge CEDA and confront the rising threat of fascism. This threat seemed confirmed when Gil Robles began openly expressing his admiration for European fascism, and when CEDA adopted elements associated with fascist parties in Italy and Germany, such as uniforms and salutes. In May 1935, Gil Robles became minister of war and one of his first acts in this post was to appoint Franco as chief of the general staff. However, at the end of 1935, corruption scandals led Zamora to dismiss Lerroux's government. New elections were scheduled for February 1936.

The Popular Front 1936

In January 1936, the left finally established its coalition – the Popular Front. Socialists, communists and liberals all joined the coalition, although the anarchists refused to participate. The Popular Front won a narrow victory in the February elections, and Azaña was once again established as prime minister. The new regime – mainly composed of middle-class liberals – was determined to undo the work of the previous government, and immediately announced a political amnesty for the prisoners of the Asturias uprising. It also reintroduced plans for land reform and restored Catalanian autonomy. At the same time, Caballero (see page 137) began calls for a Bolshevik-style revolution in Spain.

These moves naturally caused concern among those on the political right. However, they were even more troubled in April 1936, when the Popular Front found a way of bypassing the constitution to remove Zamora as president and replace him with Azaña. More alarming still was the growth of unrest across the country by workers encouraged by the Popular Front victory.

In rural areas, poor peasants – impatient for land reform – seized land from the aristocracy, and Azaña's government did nothing to stop them. In the cities, the UGT and CNT unions organised strikes to protest against low wages, and these often became violent as the Falange militia tried to break them up. As a result, the government banned the Falange, and José Antonio Primo de Rivera was imprisoned. Despite this, the unrest continued.

The role of the army

Although much of the violence was due to right-wing attacks, CEDA called for a military uprising to restore 'order'. General Emilio Mola began planning a rebellion, which had CEDA's backing as well as support from the Falange and the Carlists (a political organisation that wanted to restore the monarchy). The Falange and the Carlists were particularly important to Mola's plans, as they both had paramilitary forces that could support the army. On 17 July 1936, Mola gave the order for the coup to begin – thus triggering the Spanish Civil War.

How important was foreign intervention in deciding the outcome of the war?

The nature and events of the civil war, which lasted from July 1936 to April 1939, are covered in numerous books, including Hugh Thomas's classic study *The Spanish Civil War* and Antony Beevor's *The War for Spain*. However, when investigating the eventual outcome of the war, two factors emerge as being of particular significance: foreign intervention and the relative unity/disunity within the two camps.

Foreign intervention

The involvement of foreign powers in the Spanish Civil War was a key reason for the republican defeat. It was also an important factor in the impact of the war on international diplomacy and the collapse of collective security by 1939. In 1936, neither side was expecting a lengthy conflict – nor were they equipped for it. Consequently, both sides sought foreign help. The nationalist rebels were provided with a large amount of weapons by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy; the republicans eventually received aid from the USSR, as well as help from volunteers organised into International Brigades.