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Guerra

Jason Webster

# ¡GUERRA!

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*Living in the Shadows of the  
Spanish Civil War*

JASON WEBSTER



Doubleday

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Jason Webster is the author of the critically acclaimed *Duende* and *Andalus*. He lives in a farmhouse in the mountains just north of Valencia, Spain. His great-grandfather was a gun-runner in the Spanish Civil War.

*By the same author*

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Duende: A Journey in Search of Flamenco  
Andalus: Unlocking the Secrets of Moorish Spain



The Spanish Civil War ... came from the scarcity of water and excess of fire in the Spanish temperament. When the ardent sun of Spain dries up the land ... the parched earth splits open. The well-meaning foreigner, set ablaze himself by Spanish passions, says, 'This earth here on the right ... or else 'This earth here on the left is responsible.'

But there is but one earth.

Salvador de Madariaga

## Note

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The Civil War is still a sensitive subject in Spain. Some of the people mentioned in this book have asked for their names to be changed so that their privacy may be respected.

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# THE STAGES OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR



**JULY, 1936 - JULY, 1938**

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## The Pit

Begoña stood at the entrance to the house, leaning on her staff as her little mongrel, Rosco, panted nervously at her feet. A straw hat was tied under her chin with a dark-blue scarf, partly shading her worn, landscaped face, and eyes that shone like cinnamon stones from within layers of protecting skin.

‘One of the goats has fallen down a hole.’

Normally her husband brought the herd up here to graze, but today she had taken his place. ‘Hugo’s in the city,’ she said by way of explanation. ‘Doctor’s appointment.’

I grabbed some rope and a knife and stepped out for her to show me the way. The code up here in the mountains was never to ask for help, simply to explain a problem, and people would naturally respond. In their turn they would receive a minimum of thanks – assisting one another was how the community in this sparsely populated landscape survived. Favours were repaid with favours.

‘Where is it?’

I followed in her footsteps as we passed through fields of dry grass and sprouting blue peacock leaved bellflowers. Spring was almost over but the pale almond blossom on the slopes below us still glistened in the sunlight. Small and compact, Begoña skipped over the stones and rocks that pushed out of the thin dry soil, her cloth bag with her water-bottle and food to last the day swinging across her lower back above a wide rump. She and Hugo had both been born up here, in farmhouses across the valley that were now abandoned like the rest of them. I sometimes wondered how long ago that had been: still active, she had an outdoor face that could belong to anyone over fifty.

Begoña had always been more open and keen to chat than Hugo. You had the sense that her husband was happier with his goats, singing in solitude as the herd scattered a trail of droppings and kicked up stones wherever they trotted. Begoña, on the few occasions when she had come up to the farm, had always stopped by to say hello, accepting my offers of red wine from dusty tumblers and telling me stories of life in the valley from when she was a little girl. There used to be more rain here before the weather started changing. Snow up to your knees every winter. Now you were lucky to get any at all. Used to be a big grape-growing area, but the farmers had switched some years back to olives and almonds, which could cope better with the drier conditions.

Her animals would mill around her, munching their way through everything in my budding garden, Rosco growling them back into place if they strayed too near the fig trees, while she talked on regardless, lapping up the opportunity for conversation as though quenching a great thirst.

‘You need some tomatoes here. They like this soil. My uncle used to grow them up over the other side of the mountain, next to his tobacco plantations. Before everyone left and moved to the town, that is ...’

I loved the remoteness of this area – the mountains of Castellón: it was one of the reasons why Salud and I had looked for a house here in the first place. I’d been living in Spain for some twelve years now, mostly in the city, but the landscape surrounding us here tapped into an enduring vision I had of my adopted homeland: the silence, the spectacular mountain views, the scent of pine forest. Often we caught sight of eagles soaring in the sky overhead, brightly coloured butterflies would flutter around our feet, while Spanish ibex, their horns like lyres, would sometimes come to drink at sunset from our little spring on the other side of the hill. Yet for Begoña the silence was a source of sadness. These

had all been bustling farms once; now Salud and I were the only ones living so far up the valley slowly renovating a small group of ancient stone cottages — a *mas* — that hadn't been lived in for decades.

The area was rich in history: the Maestrat had once been the battle ground of El Cid, later domain of the Templars and Hospitallers, presented to the knights as a gift by King James I the Conqueror after winning it from the Moors. Cathar refugees had settled here after being persecuted and all but exterminated in southern France by the early fourteenth century. It was said there were still heretical motifs on the churches from those times, mysterious symbols as little understood as the palaeolithic wall paintings depicting strange fertility dances that decorated some of the caves nearby. This had been the heartland of the ancient Iberians, the 'swarthy-skinned and curly-haired men' described by Tacitus, a warrior people who worshipped doves and a sea goddess, and who cremated their dead before burying their ashes in urns.

We walked on over the fields, scampering down the banks of terraces where the old dry-stone walls had crumbled away through lack of care. Even now, there were no telephone wires or electricity pylons to be seen: no signals or reminders of modern, mechanized man.

'Before my mother was born,' was all Begoña would say when I asked if she knew when all the terraces had been built. Their imprint was visible on almost all the faces of the surrounding hills and mountains, but many were thickly overgrown. I'd resisted asking when her mother had been born. It wouldn't have shed much light on the matter anyway. How *long* before her mother was born? The terraces could have been there for hundreds of years.

The goats bleated and groaned as we covered territory they had already crossed that day. They had eaten the best of the grass already and were now being presented with their own leftovers. Still they munched on, managing somehow to eat and walk at the same time. Every so often the dog gave a threatening growl.

After a half-hour stroll we passed a ruined old house that stood further down the slope, and turned sharply off the path to descend through gorse and pines sheltering in the shadows of the tallest peak of the valley. The sheer cliff face was a mosaic of orange and pink rock, curling round like the inside of a barrel.

'Rosco!' The dog was ordered to keep the animals at bay as we pushed downwards.

'I don't usually bring them here,' Begoña explained. 'But there's been so little rain this year.' She pushed the branches and bushes out of her way with her wooden staff as she followed a path on the hillside I could barely make out.

Halfway down the slope, in the shade of a cluster of holm oaks, was a hole: an irregularly shaped fault in the ground with a fifteen-foot drop to the bottom. Gorse bushes smothered the rim, so that it was almost impossible to see it until we were nearly falling into it ourselves. At the sound of our voices, the fallen goat started bleating.

'Come round this side,' Begoña said. 'There are a few foot-holds.'

She pushed the bushes back as I edged to the side and looked down. The small brown goat was standing on an outcrop of rock near the bottom, bellowing now it could see us, pleading for help. Judging by the way it was standing, it seemed to have broken something.

I climbed down, trying not to fall or push any loose rock down on to the already frightened animal. It didn't look too difficult. Once I reached the goat, it should be just a matter of tying the rope around its body and hauling it back up.

The creature gave a start as I skipped down the last few feet to reach it, but it seemed to understand that I was there to help, staring up into my face and bleating plaintively as I stroked its head. Begoña threw the rope down to me, keeping hold of one end while I wrapped the other underneath its belly several times and through its legs, following her instructions as to how best

support the animal's weight. I fumbled with the rope until it felt reasonably secure, finishing off with a reef knot. It was the only knot I could remember, but it seemed to do the trick.

Getting out of the hole proved more difficult than getting in, as the flaky limestone rock easily gave way under my weight, but after a couple of attempts, holding on to clumps of wiry grass growing out of the sides, I was back with Begoña at the top.

'*Bien,*' she said. Wrapping the loose end of the rope around her waist, she started to heave the animal up, her strong arms tensing with the strain. Down in the hole the bleats turned to screams as the goat took off from the ground and immediately crashed into the side. It kicked out at the rock with its knees, unable, it seemed, to straighten its legs and fend off with its hooves. It was already damaged enough, I thought. If we weren't careful we were going to hurt it even more in trying to save it. Crouching down on the ground, I tried to lift the rope as far as possible from the side of the hole, hoping to spare the animal too many bruises during its ascent. I would have taken the rope myself but Begoña barely paused for breath as she hauled the beast up, her powerful squat body twisting like a spring as, inch by inch, the goat rose towards us.

With a couple more tugs the animal was within my grasp. Grabbing it by the upper part of its front legs I lifted it the final two feet, pushing it in Begoña's direction for her to take a look. One leg was clearly broken: the goat was hopping around bleating frantically, obviously in some pain. We probably have to carry it all the way home. The leg would take time to heal – a few weeks at least.

I bent down to brush the dirt from my legs and glanced into the hole again. It was a long way down. No wonder the poor thing was in such a state.

As I was caught by the sense of falling into this empty void, the bleating behind me stopped. I looked over to where Begoña was attending to the animal, wondering how she had managed to silence it so suddenly. She was wiping her hands on her hips. The goat lay limp on the ground like a rag doll, its eyes half closed, tongue poking out between the teeth of its open mouth.

'You've killed it?' I asked, trying to check a note of incredulity in my voice.

'We lost one last year as well,' she said. 'Can't take your eye off them for a second.'

She bent down and with a short swinging motion lifted the dead beast up on to her shoulder, holding it on either side by its legs. Back up the hill Rosco gave a bark, sensing that his mistress was about to return.

I watched for a moment as she pushed her way back up the slope, flicking the bushes aside with her staff to get through as she had done before. On her back the goat's head flopped like a heavy shopping bag: lifeless, motionless meat. There was no blood; she must have broken its neck while my back was turned. Swift and efficient. I felt dizzy.

Eventually I started up the hill after her, fighting feelings of sentimentality about the fate of the animal. Goats were just goats, I reminded myself. If someone offered me goat stew that evening for dinner I would happily eat it. This was just one goat more. And Begoña, who'd been a goatherd all her life, knew how best to deal with them. They weren't pets: they were her livelihood. A goat with a broken leg was a liability.

Yes, I thought, but even still.

As this conflict churned inside me, I only half registered that we were not going back up the way we had come. Rather than cutting across the almond orchards, we had walked further down the valley and round to an area at the side of the mountain I had never been to before. The area was thick with dark-green Austrian pines, their trunks bent out of the sloping ground like the necks of flamingos. Dragonflies fluttered from stone to stone under squat dusty oaks, the shine from whose thick stunted leaves was already baked dry in the heat.

The sweat quickly evaporated from my forehead in the mountain air, and I felt the back of my throat begin to itch. I wondered why Begoña had decided to go back this way. She pushed on, a tanned

paw-like hand held out in front of her with a bent finger pointing ahead.

~~We came out from under the shade of the trees on to an open stretch of land facing east. In the distance a few fields were still being cared for, with rows of almond trees bursting through ploughed pink soil. But mostly this area had been abandoned.~~

‘You might want to see this,’ Begoña said simply. I looked around – beneath the wild grass there were odd dents in the earth, unnatural creases snaking for a hundred yards or more in the direction of the sun. Away to the left I could make out a dark pit, partially obscured by gorse bushes.

‘This is where the bodies are buried,’ she said.

For a moment I thought she meant a place where they dumped the bodies of goats like the one slung over her shoulders. But something in her expression made me wonder.

‘What bodies?’

The massacre had taken place here in the mountains in the early summer of 1938. In the USA and Britain audiences were flocking to see Errol Flynn at the cinema in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. Germany had just absorbed Austria in the Anschluss, the first *Superman* comics had recently been published, and oil had been discovered for the first time in Saudi Arabia. But Spain at that point was caught up in a vicious and bloody civil war that would cost at least half a million lives, force a similar number into exile, and see the eventual victory and establishment of one of the twentieth century’s most enduring dictators, General Francisco Franco, an austere and ruthless Catholic soldier from the northwest of Spain. A second world war, as many already sensed, was just around the corner, but in the meantime a bloody dress rehearsal was under way on Spanish soil as the Soviet Union, Germany and Italy carried out a proxy war in preparation for the real thing.

By the late spring of 1938 the Spanish Civil War was almost two years old and entering its final phase. General Franco and his supporters, who called themselves the Nationalists, were slowly beating their opponents – the Republicans, defenders of the democratic state Franco was trying to overthrow. The Nationalists were backed by Hitler and Mussolini’s weaponry and soldiers, while the Republicans were relying ever more heavily on their only serious international backer, Stalin. The Republicans were in disarray at this late stage in the war: Franco had reached the Mediterranean and had cut the remaining territory in two. He was now moving his army down the coast towards Valencia.

As I now learned, it was at this point that the front line had reached where I was standing that morning, surrounded by goats on a dry mountainside, a jittery dog scuttling about my feet and a dead animal hanging over the shoulders of my elderly neighbour.

I knew only a little about the war. It was not a subject you talked about much in Spain, where people usually wanted to forget and get on with their lives, even now, almost seventy years since it had begun. Friends had often dismissed the subject as unimportant. It was politics, nothing more, just a scrap between some people on the Left and some others on the Right. And anyway, it was all history, finished. Caught up as I had been by other aspects of the country – the colour and passion of Spanish things that usually drew people here – I had side-stepped this part of Spanish history. I had been too busy enjoying everything that fitted in with my romantic dreams of what Spain was all about: the sensuality of flamenco, the exoticism of the country’s Moorish past

Nonetheless, I was fascinated by what Begoña began to tell me.

‘This is where the Republicans had their last defences,’ she said. ‘These lines here’ – she nodded towards the zigzag markings – ‘were the trenches.’

It wasn’t easy to make them out, with the flat midday light almost obliterating the contours in the landscape. But as she pointed, they began to stand out more clearly: man-made shapes that appeared somehow out of place in their natural surroundings. Mostly filled in now, the trenches were about two metres wide, each stretch some eight or ten metres long before a dogleg bend to another stretch



creating a jagged effect.

~~Begoña told me how Republican fighters had made a stand out here in the countryside. Franco's men marched southwards. It was difficult mountainous territory, and while the Nationalist capture of the nearby village had been straightforward, the Republicans hoped to slow the advance by leading the enemy out into the hills. They hadn't lasted more than a few days.~~

~~'Franco's planes came from over there' – she pointed towards the northeast – 'and shot them up~~

~~The shape of the defences, it seemed, was supposed to offer some protection against a line attack from the air. But the planes returned again and again, manoeuvring so that their machine-guns could fire the length of each stretch of the trenches.~~

~~'Some managed to escape but most of them were killed.'~~

~~There was nothing but wild flowers and birds today; only a lifetime ago, this place had been a killing field. I looked around at our peaceful, pastoral surroundings and struggled to imagine what must have happened that day.~~

~~'And it took place right here?' I said, as though demanding confirmation from her. Begoña took a swig from her water-bottle and nodded. The dead goat's head swung limp and senseless on her back, its half-open eyes now mere balls of drying jelly.~~

~~I glanced up in the direction from which the Nationalist fighters had approached. In the distance, the Penyagolosa, the highest mountain in this part of Spain, once sacred to the Celtic sun-god Lugh, pushed upwards into a cloudless sky. Further up the valley I could make out the whitewashed walls of my own farmhouse glinting in the sun.~~

~~'The bodies,' I said to Begoña. 'Are they ...?'~~

~~'They're still here,' she said matter-of-factly.~~

~~I looked again at the trenches and the scarred earth where we were standing. I felt uneasy about walking on people's graves, thinking about the men who were lying here, about the kind of people they'd been, about their wives and lovers, their children.~~

~~'How many Republicans were here?' I asked.~~

~~About seventy of them were buried there, she told me.~~

~~'I was eight at the time,' she continued. 'I came with my mother and brother to sow wheat that morning. We saw the Francoists dig a pit, a *fosa*, and then throw the bodies in from a lorry on top of each other.'~~

~~For the first time I caught the emotion in her voice, a tightening in her throat.~~

~~'My mother didn't stop weeping all day.'~~

~~Only her voice betrayed the depth of her emotion, her face screwed tight as it had been for decades against the sun and the elements. And perhaps, also, against the memories of what she had witnessed here as a little girl. The experience she had had, the event that had occurred here, filled the space around us like lead.~~

~~My mind was filling with questions: why had they dumped the bodies here rather than giving them proper burial? What had happened to their families? Why hadn't anyone moved them since Franco had been dead for almost thirty years. The country was a democracy once more. Couldn't a memorial be erected at least? It was disturbing to think that here in this lost, sun-drenched valley, with its fields of wild flowers, the smell of blossom filling the air, bursts of birdsong set against a blank buzz of honeybees, something so terrible could have happened.~~

~~The questions and thoughts filled my mind, but it was almost impossible to speak.~~

~~'I'm the only one left who saw what happened,' she said at last. Rosco was curled around her feet, looking up at me with mournful eyes. 'I'm the only one left.'~~

~~Grief and sorrow now seemed to flow like an electric current from her skin. If I put a hand on her arm, in some inadequate gesture of sympathy, I was sure I would feel a shock. There was one thing~~

however, that I had to ask. Why had she brought me here?

‘I don’t know,’ she said, turning away. ‘I don’t know.’

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\*

I watched her walk away with the herd down the dirt track, the dead goat still on her shoulders, the dog scampering about making sure the rest of the animals moved forwards. From behind, the blue scarf holding down her straw hat looked like a dark gash across the top of her head. The weather seemed to be changing, and from the west a hot suffocating wind was beginning to blow, bringing with it the dust and sand of the plains. It passed over the cliff face and down into the hollow of the valley, circling and tightening before whipping round and surging up into my face in concentrated, melting bursts. My eyes stayed fixed on the old woman’s compact form, her skirts flapping around her ankles as she gradually disappeared into the distance. So much strength and energy seemed to be held within her, it was strange to think that one day, like the men dumped in the field she had shown me, it would be extinguished. It was as though she had given a small part of herself to me by taking me to that place.

I walked back up the slope towards home, but the house, the farm, was different. The change was subtle, but immediate, and the cracks in my vision of what I thought I had were already starting to show. Violence and blood had stained my perfect world.

## Prelude

Two murders in Madrid acted as a catalyst for the Spanish Civil War: the assassinations within hours of each other of a policeman by political activists, and of a political activist by policemen.

On the night of 12 July 1936, a young police officer, Lieutenant José Castillo, left his new bride to walk to work from their home on Augusto Figueroa Street, in the old working-class district in the centre of the capital. Castillo was part of a special force of shock troops known as the Assault Guard, a body set up five years previously to defend Spain's nascent and fragile republic. An active left-winger, Castillo had been involved in the killing of a leading member of Spain's fascist party, the Falange, during a riot in April earlier that year. They were violent times: political murders were taking place almost every day, hundreds of thousands of Spaniards were on strike, churches were being burned down. There were whisperings of a military coup against the newly elected government – a left-wing coalition – now in charge in Madrid. Falangists had sworn revenge against Castillo for the death of their colleague, the Marquis of Heredia, and had sent the policeman's wife, Consuelo, a note the day before her wedding advising her not to marry a man 'soon to be a corpse'.

It was normally only a ten-minute walk to work, but that night Castillo didn't make it. On Fuencarral Street four gunmen were waiting for him; they shot him down and disappeared. A passing journalist tried to help the wounded man, but arrived only to hear his last words: 'Take me to my wife.' He was dead by the time they got him to a nearby medical centre.

News of the killing quickly reached the police station. Castillo was the second officer in the local force to be killed that year – Captain Carlos Faraudo had been gunned down in the centre of Madrid while he was taking a walk with his wife. Angry and determined to exact revenge, the officers drew up a list of suspects and then, as night fell, began leaving the police station in small groups to make arrests. Suspicion fell on right-wingers, particularly the fascists of the Falange party and their associates. It was late by the time the last group of policemen headed out into the streets, taking a police lorry number seventeen, out into the wealthy Salamanca district of Madrid. They were led by Captain Fernando Condés of the Civil Guard, Castillo's best friend. Not all in the vehicle were police officers, however: two were members of the communist-socialist youth movement; another was a young Galician socialist called Luis Cuenca.

Police lorry number seventeen headed first to the home of a leading politician named José María Gil Robles. A heavy-jowled, trilby-wearing man, Gil Robles was a prominent figure on the Right, the leader of the Catholic CEDA coalition party, who had tried but failed to win power and establish an authoritarian Catholic regime through the ballot box earlier that year. Fortunately for him, that night he wasn't at home, having left to spend the weekend in Biarritz with his family. The policemen would have to look elsewhere.

One of the men in the lorry mentioned that another leading right-winger lived close by. José Calvo Sotelo, an economist, had been a finance minister before the establishment of the Republic, and was a brilliant orator who was quickly eclipsing Gil Robles as the leading light on the opposition benches. With his clean good looks and more radical policies, he was gaining many followers, moving ever closer to the Falange against the backdrop of a country rapidly falling apart.

By now it was around three o'clock in the morning on 13 July. Calvo Sotelo was at his home on

Velázquez Street that night, having spent weeks moving from place to place for fear of assassination. The policemen drove to his house, roused him and ordered him to get dressed and accompany them to the police station. As a member of parliament, Calvo Sotelo was granted freedom from arrest. Still, he decided to go along with them, promising his family he would call them as soon as he arrived at the station. 'Unless,' he added as he was being led through the door, 'these gentlemen are going to blow my brains out.'

With the politician inside, the police lorry set off at top speed through the streets of Madrid. Calvo Sotelo wedged in the front between a couple of policemen. After several minutes, Luis Cuenco, sitting in the back, fired two bullets into his head. The body stayed upright until they reached the Eastern Cemetery, where they left it with the night guard.

'As they were in uniform, I didn't object,' the guard later told an inquest.

The body wasn't identified until the following morning.

Condés later said he had only meant to arrest Calvo Sotelo, and that Cuenca had shot him without his orders.

A day later, on 14 July, two funerals were held. At one the coffin of Lieutenant Castillo was draped in a red flag, socialists, Republicans and communists raising clenched fists in revolutionary salute. Several hours later Calvo Sotelo's body was buried at the same cemetery, his coffin marked with a cross, mourners stretching their right arms out in the fascist salute.

The murders had split the country in two. Three days later the Spanish Civil War began.

The murders of Castillo and Calvo Sotelo were the spark that set the Civil War in motion, but came after a long period in which Spain had become increasingly polarized and fractured, hatred and violence taking root as the country was torn apart by extremist forces. By the time the policeman and the politician were killed, there was no way of avoiding war, so intense was the loathing between conservatives and progressives, right-wingers and the Left, and so fragile was the state meant to hold them together.

Spain in 1936 was a republic, officially the country's second after an unsuccessful and short-lived experiment with republicanism in 1873. The second fall of the monarchy had come in 1931 when King Alfonso XIII abdicated after elections for town halls across the country showed a collapse in his popularity. Preferring self-imposed exile to a possible civil war, he departed for France, and in a bloodless transition to a republican regime, power fell into the hands of liberals and left-wingers who had been pushing for years for modernization and an end to the monarchy. The new prime minister was the Andalusian barrister Niceto Alcalá Zamora, who formed a government made up of socialists and Republicans. The industrial revolutions that had taken place elsewhere in Europe were still in their infancy in Spain in the 1930s – new industries were concentrated principally in the northern areas of Catalonia and the Basque Country – and the main foreign export earner was still agriculture. Illiteracy rates were as high as 50 per cent, while millions lived in semi-slavery on vast feudal estates in the south – *latifundios* – where hunger was the norm and work scarce. Life there was primitive. Landowners were often absent, preferring the life of the city, while a surplus of labourers paid a daily rate meant farm managers had complete control over the lives of the workers, employing them and sending them away each morning as they saw fit. Much of the soil was poor and the climate was dry, and many landlords left swathes of their farms uncultivated, preferring the land to stay as an arid wasteland under their own control than be farmed by hungry peasants. And so the aristocrats and gentry and their moneyed offspring – *señoritos* – would spend their time in luxury in the capital and other big cities, while country folk starved – some even having to eat grass to survive – stuck in a pit of poverty and ignorance. What had been the point of abolishing black slavery, the socialist politician Indalecio Prieto asked, if white slavery still existed in Spain?

The country, then with a population of around twenty-four million people, was sharply divided two, and there was immense pressure on the new Republic to produce much-needed reform, with hopes that after centuries of stagnation Spain would finally catch up with its neighbours. But while liberals and left-wingers dreamed of a better future, there was also fierce resistance to any change principally from three powerful groups with a strong interest in maintaining things as they were: the old ruling class, the Church and the army.

The early thirties was a bad time to be building a new state. The world economy was still suffering from the crash of 1929, while political extremism was on the rise from the Soviet Union, Italy and Germany. But external pressures on the young Republic were almost nothing to the problems at home. The liberal intellectuals leading the new Spain made great moves to create the country they had always dreamed of, setting up almost ten thousand new schools in their first year, freeing the press and passing reformist agrarian laws. They also tried to modernize the country's top-heavy army where there were some seventeen thousand officers for a force of around a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers: a ratio of one to nine. Attempts to improve this, and obliging officers to swear allegiance to the new Republic, won the liberals many enemies in the armed forces.

But while conservatives dug in their heels over any change, the Republic's own supporters complained things weren't moving fast enough. And one of the biggest groups on the Left, the anarchists, whose support for the liberal government would ebb and flow over the coming years, was against the idea of a state altogether. More and more, the men in the centre felt attacked from all sides.

What made matters worse was the impression the liberal rulers gave of being unable to maintain law and order. Less than a month after the Republic came into being, six churches were burned down in Madrid after disturbances between supporters of the Republic and monarchists. The police did nothing to stop the attacks, the then war minister Manuel Azaña exclaiming that he would prefer the churches of Spain to burn than that harm should come to a single Republican.

Likewise, conservatives, who were slowly organizing themselves into political parties and formations, felt increasingly alarmed at the growth in regionalism in the country. The idea of 'Spain' had always been a problematic concept, the country being more a collection of nations than a single entity. What were now called regions had almost all been, at some time in the distant past, independent kingdoms, principalities or counties, tiny fiefdoms which had been born at the time of the Reconquest and which had grown as Christian territory expanded southwards at the expense of the Moors during the Middle Ages. Through a succession of wars, treaties and marriages these had eventually been united under a single crown some five hundred years earlier. Now that the king had gone, however, Catalonia in particular started to test its strength, drafting a 'statute of autonomy' in 1932 which gave the region its own government – the Generalitat – with powers over local administration, civil law and health. For the army, ever the defender of the *patria*, the fatherland, nothing was more sacred than the unity of the country. The Catalan move was seen as a dangerous threat and prompted the first attempt to bring the young Republic down, a rebellion that became known as the Sanjurjada.

General Sanjurjo was a hero of Spain's wars against the Riff tribesmen in northern Morocco. On 10 August 1932 he took part in a *pronunciamiento* – a coup typical of the nineteenth century, whereby a military officer would make a proclamation against the government, either rousing enough support to take over the country or getting shot down in glory. Although momentarily successful in Seville where he launched a manifesto, Sanjurjo's co-conspirators failed in their uprisings in Madrid and other major cities across the country after their plot was betrayed by a prostitute. Sanjurjo was arrested while trying to flee to Portugal and was imprisoned.

The time was not yet right to bring down the Republic, but conservatives were shortly to gain the

upper hand. Frustrated by the slow pace of reform, anarchists were encouraging peasants to occupy villages and plots of land spontaneously and start farming them for themselves. One of the most famous cases occurred in January 1933 in the Andalusian village of Casas Viejas. Unlike earlier disturbances, which had involved church burning, this time the authorities used extreme measures to restore control. Police reinforcements stormed the village and violently imposed order. As they were carrying out house-to-house searches, one of the villagers, known as Seisdedos, locked himself in with a handful of other anarchists and refused to come out. In the gun battle that followed, two policemen were shot. Eventually the police burned the house down, killing all inside, although Seisdedos's daughter, Libertaria, had managed to escape. Later the police shot dead fourteen anarchists who had surrendered earlier in the operation. The massacre caused an outcry and the socialists decided to withdraw their support for the liberal government. In the following elections in November 1933 conservative parties were duly elected to power.

There followed two years of rule by right-wing coalitions. Agrarian reform was not just halted but reversed, many peasants ending up worse off than they had been before. The period became, for the Left, the *bienio negro*, the 'black biennium', with its lowest point in October 1934. The Left became alarmed at the entry into government at this time of the Catholic authoritarian CEDA coalition. The group was led by José María Gil Robles, an admirer of Hitler and Mussolini who had been present at one of the Nuremberg rallies. He allowed himself to be addressed as *Jefe*, or 'Chief' in imitation of *Führer* or *Duce*, and was keen to introduce Nazi propaganda techniques to Spain.

Convinced that Gil Robles's party's inclusion in the cabinet marked the first step in the creation of a fascist state, left-wing groups organized a general strike and staged a series of revolts across the country, all doomed to failure. Only in the northern mining region of Asturias did the rebellion hold out, thanks to a rare alliance between socialists, anarchists and communists. There, local troops weren't able to quell the movement, and so the government in Madrid called in the toughest force that Spain then had – the Army of Africa, based in the Spanish territories in northern Morocco. Led by General Francisco Franco, colonial troops and soldiers from the Spanish Foreign Legion suppressed the left-wing miners using merciless and blood-thirsty methods they had developed in the Rif mountains. In an operation which lasted a fortnight, two thousand people were killed and a number of towns and villages destroyed. General Franco became a pin-up for the Right and a hate figure for the Left. Few then realized it, but a precedent had been set for the coming Civil War.

The repression and defeats of two years of right-wing governments served to reunite left-wing parties, so that by the time elections came round once again in February 1936 they were able to stand on a united ticket – the Popular Front, a name thought up by the communists. This time the anarchists decided to vote, if only to secure the release of their imprisoned comrades. On the Right, the CEDA leader Gil Robles presented himself as the last hope against the threat of Marxist revolution, leading a coalition of parties known as the National Front. Both sides were already referring to themselves in the language of confrontation. The Popular Front, again promising sweeping social reforms, won the vote by a whisker.

Gil Robles's plan had been to gain power through the ballot box, much as Hitler had concentrated his efforts after the failure of the Munich Putsch. After the CEDA's electoral defeat in Spain, this strategy lay in ruins. Fifteen thousand members of the youth movement of Gil Robles's party switched en masse to the radical Falange party, the Spanish fascists.

The Falange had been set up in 1933 by the young aristocrat José Antonio Primo de Rivera. It was a radical, extremist group that called for social reform and authoritarian nationalistic rule, which was engaging in a violent conflict with left-wing groups. Inspired by Italian fascism, it had been named after an ancient Macedonian battle formation. Until the elections of February 1936, when the Popular Front came to power, the Falange had been a small fringe organization, but now, with a new influx of

members, it became a more important player on the stage. After acts of increasing violence, including murders and bombings, in March its offices were closed down and its dapper young leader was imprisoned. José-Antonio would never know freedom again, although he was later destined to become a mythical figure in Spanish politics.

For the extreme Left, the victory of the Popular Front at the elections in itself was not enough and it urged that the pace of social reforms be increased. The leader of the radical wing of the socialist party, a semi-literate former stucco worker called Francisco Largo Caballero, was travelling around the country making increasingly inflammatory remarks about revolution, and was flatteringly dubbed 'the Spanish Lenin' by the Soviet press. Meanwhile, on a single day in March that year, over six thousand peasants in the western region of Extremadura spontaneously took over almost three thousand farms. Having feared for their property, landowners were now beginning to fear for their lives. Both sides seemed to be hell-bent on confrontation, with frequent gun battles in the streets between left-wingers and Falangists and other far-right groups. And the violence continued. On 1 June 1936 the CEDA leader Gil Robles claimed in parliament that in the four months since the Popular Front had won the general election 160 churches had been destroyed, 269 people assassinated, 10 newspaper offices sacked, 113 general strikes called and 146 bombs set off. Anarchy ruled; the government had lost control.

At the centre, the liberal intellectuals in the Popular Front, once again in charge, proved incapable of holding these forces of mutual destruction in check. Warnings came that right-wing army officers were planning another coup, but almost no counter measures were taken, ministers refusing to arm the people whose votes had given them power, but whose radicalism they feared. As a precaution they removed from Madrid those generals most suspected of plotting against the government and sent them to the outer regions. Franco, famous for his repression of the left-wing rebellion in Asturias eighteen months earlier, was packed off to the Canary Islands, General Manuel Godea went to the Balearic Islands, while General Emilio Mola was sent to Pamplona in the north. Sanjurjo, now out of prison, was in exile in Portugal.

Mola's forced move to Pamplona was a godsend for the plotters. This tall, bespectacled general now became the mastermind of the coming coup from the centre of a highly Catholic, conservative part of the country, and was nicknamed el Director. Secret plans were drawn up for the army to rise simultaneously across Spain and Spanish Morocco, thus delivering a knockout blow against the government and preventing what was seen as an otherwise inevitable Bolshevik revolution. The key was to be the use of extreme violence. 'We must sow terror,' Mola insisted to his co-conspirators. 'We must give the sense of domination by eliminating all those who do not think like us, without scruples or hesitation.'<sup>1</sup>

On 7 July the annual San Fermín bull-running fiesta took place in Pamplona. Mola used the holiday to organize a clandestine meeting with the other plotters. They had to move fast or the government would eventually smoke them out. But there were problems: the local conservatives in Pamplona, the Requetés, were demanding more concessions for their pet causes; others were urging caution. Franco sent a telegram from the Canary Islands saying the time still wasn't right. Mola was furious. Franco was an important figure, a well-respected soldier, and would be a key factor in the success of the coup. Mola decided to carry on regardless.

Two things would work in his favour. In Madrid, Prime Minister Casares Quiroga studiously ignored the barrage of warnings about the coming disaster, like a Cassandra figure in reverse. And then, on 13 July, José Calvo Sotelo was shot dead in a police lorry.

At once all the doubts and calls for caution were silenced. Policemen had murdered a leading politician on the Right. No further justification was needed for a coup. Franco telegraphed again from the Canaries. This time, he was on board.

The rebellion was set for 18 July at five o'clock in the afternoon, just after siesta time. The starting point was to be the home of the Army of Africa – the Spanish Protectorate in Morocco.



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