

THE BEGINNING OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR IN 1936: POLITICAL CRISIS AND MILITARY UPRISING

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Abstract: *This article examines the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, focusing on the political, social, and military factors that led to the outbreak of the conflict. The war began after a military uprising against the democratically elected Popular Front government of the Second Spanish Republic. However, the causes of the conflict were deeper than the coup itself. Political polarization, economic inequality, conflicts between conservative and progressive forces, regional tensions, and the role of the army all contributed to the crisis. The article analyzes the situation in Spain before July 1936, the rise of the Popular Front, the organization of the military revolt, and the transformation of the uprising into a full-scale civil war.*

Keywords: *Spanish Civil War, 1936, Second Spanish Republic, Popular Front, military uprising, Franco, political crisis, Spain.*

Introduction

The Spanish Civil War, which began in 1936, was one of the most important and dramatic conflicts of twentieth-century Europe. It was not only a domestic struggle for political power but also a confrontation between different ideological visions of society. The war divided Spain into two main camps: the Republicans, who supported the Second Spanish Republic, and the Nationalists, who opposed the Republic and were led by military officers including General Francisco Franco.

The beginning of the war cannot be explained only by the military uprising of July 1936. The conflict was the result of long-term political, social, economic, and cultural tensions within Spanish society. During the 1930s, Spain experienced sharp conflicts over land reform, the role of the Catholic Church, the power of the army, workers' rights, regional autonomy, and the



future of democracy. These disputes gradually weakened political stability and created conditions for armed confrontation.

The year 1936 became decisive. In February, the Popular Front, a coalition of left-wing and republican parties, won the general election. Its victory alarmed conservative groups, landowners, monarchists, some army officers, and sections of the Church. At the same time, social unrest, political violence, strikes, and mutual distrust between political groups increased. In this tense atmosphere, a group of military officers prepared a rebellion against the government. The uprising began in July 1936 and quickly turned into a civil war.

Spain before the War

The Second Spanish Republic was established in 1931 after King Alfonso XIII left the country. The Republic introduced a wide program of reforms aimed at modernizing Spain. These reforms included reducing the political influence of the army, limiting the power of the Catholic Church in education, granting greater rights to workers, promoting land reform, and recognizing regional autonomy, especially in Catalonia.

However, these reforms divided Spanish society. Supporters of the Republic believed that Spain needed modernization, democracy, secular education, and social justice. Opponents feared that the reforms threatened traditional values, religion, private property, and national unity. This conflict between reform and tradition became one of the main sources of instability.

Land reform was especially controversial. In rural Spain, large estates were controlled by wealthy landowners, while many peasants lived in poverty. The Republican government attempted to improve the situation of rural workers, but reforms were slow and incomplete. As a result, peasants became frustrated, while landowners became increasingly hostile toward the Republic.

The role of the Catholic Church was another major issue. The Republic promoted secular policies, which reduced Church influence in schools and public life. Many conservatives viewed this as an attack on religion. On the other hand, left-wing groups believed that the Church had too much social and political power.

The army also remained an important political force. Many officers disliked the Republic's reforms and believed that Spain needed order and



strong authority. Some military leaders began to see themselves as defenders of national unity against socialism, separatism, and disorder.

The Popular Front Victory in 1936

The election of February 1936 was a turning point. The Popular Front, which included republicans, socialists, communists, and other left-wing groups, won the election. Its program included amnesty for political prisoners, continuation of social reforms, and defense of the Republic.

For left-wing supporters, the Popular Front victory represented hope for social change and democratic reform. For conservative forces, however, it appeared as a threat. They feared revolution, the spread of communism, and the loss of traditional authority. This fear encouraged some military officers and right-wing groups to plan a revolt.

After the election, political tension increased. Street violence between right-wing and left-wing groups became more frequent. Strikes, demonstrations, and clashes created an atmosphere of instability. The government struggled to maintain order. Both sides increasingly believed that the other side represented a danger to Spain's future.

The assassination of José Calvo Sotelo, a leading right-wing politician, in July 1936 intensified the crisis. Although military conspirators had already been preparing an uprising, this event gave them a stronger justification for action. They claimed that Spain was falling into chaos and that the army had to intervene.

The Military Uprising of July 1936

The military uprising began on July 17, 1936, in Spanish Morocco, where army units rebelled against the Republican government. The revolt then spread to mainland Spain on July 18. The rebels expected a quick victory, hoping that major cities and military units would join them.

However, the uprising did not succeed everywhere. In some regions, including parts of northern and western Spain, the rebels gained control. In other important areas, such as Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, and much of the industrial east, workers, loyal soldiers, and Republican supporters resisted the revolt. As a result, Spain was divided into Republican and Nationalist zones.

The failure of the military coup to take control of the whole country immediately transformed the uprising into a civil war. The Nationalists controlled some rural and conservative areas, while the Republicans held



many major cities and industrial centers. Both sides began organizing armies, seeking foreign support, and mobilizing society for war.

General Francisco Franco soon emerged as one of the leading figures of the Nationalist side. His command of the Army of Africa gave him strong military influence. Over time, he became the main leader of the Nationalist movement.

From Coup to Civil War

The beginning of the Spanish Civil War was marked by the collapse of political compromise. The Republic could not unite all social groups behind democratic institutions, while the military rebels refused to accept the results of the election and the legitimacy of the government. The conflict quickly became ideological.

For the Republicans, the war was a defense of democracy and the Republic against military rebellion and fascism. For the Nationalists, it was a crusade to save Spain from disorder, communism, and anti-religious forces. These opposing interpretations made reconciliation extremely difficult.

International factors also influenced the conflict. Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy supported the Nationalists, while the Soviet Union supported the Republic. Volunteers from many countries joined the International Brigades to fight for the Republican side. Thus, the Spanish Civil War became a symbol of the wider ideological struggle in Europe before the Second World War.

Conclusion

The Spanish Civil War began in 1936 as a military uprising against the Second Spanish Republic, but its roots were much deeper. Political polarization, social inequality, disputes over religion and land reform, regional tensions, and the role of the army all contributed to the crisis. The victory of the Popular Front in February 1936 intensified fears among conservative and military groups, leading to the rebellion of July 1936.

The uprising failed to capture the entire country quickly, and Spain was divided into two armed camps. This failure turned the coup into a long and destructive civil war. The beginning of the Spanish Civil War shows how political extremism, social division, and the breakdown of democratic compromise can lead a society into armed conflict.



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