

The Spanish Civil War: The Republican Forces and the Triumphs and Tragedies of  
the Ideological Battle

Alexander Saunders

Senior Division

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*“Long live the Popular Front! Long live the union of all anti-fascists! Long live the Republic of the people! The Fascists shall not pass! THEY SHALL NOT PASS!” - Dolores Ibárruri, “¡No Pasarán!”*

The Spanish Civil War; Republicans versus Nationalists, Fascism versus Democracy, Freedom versus Oppression. Whichever philosophy it was, the Spanish Civil War called thousands to its causes, and shaped the history of Europe and Spain for countless decades to come. The war lasted from July 1936 to April 1939 and claimed the lives of some 500,000 people. The triumphs and tragedies of the war can be linked to one idea, the difference in ideology. The Republican ideology was united under a single goal, however so disunited and partisan in approach that they fell apart under the stress. The ideological triumphs, and human tragedies, can all be attributed to who was fighting for the Republic.

The Republican forces were made up of the loyalist remains of the Popular Front government, a left leaning coalition of parties, as well as separate Anarcho-Syndicalists<sup>1</sup> forces. The government was founded after the 1936 general elections following the collapse of the previous Right Reactionary government. The Popular Front only narrowly won the election against the Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right, (CEDA) hinting at the great divide in the Spanish people. Founded as the Spanish front against fascism, the front was an early coalition of socialists, communists, and the liberal Republicans all with a common goal, the defeat of Fascism. The motivation for a Spanish front against fascism originated with two important events, the Spanish October Revolution, and the rise of Fascism in Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> Anarcho Syndicalism was the most prominent form of Anarchism in Spain. It's philosophy advocates for the collectivisation of the economy to be controlled by worker unions, or syndicates. Being Anarchists they also don't believe in a central government, so general management would be left to individuals of councils.

By October 1934, Spain was in considerable political strife. CEDA, a quasi-fascist political organisation had just gained three ministerial positions in forming a coalition with the Radical Republican Party (PRR). This new power worried the left who organised a strike to bring the 'Revolution'<sup>2</sup> to Spain, and prevent the rise of Fascism. The strike was called by the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) and their affiliated trade union the UGT. While the strike failed to take hold across most of the country, in the region of Asturias, mining workers began a full revolution. While the miners fought bravely, within two weeks the Spanish Army of Africa had crushed the uprising. Around 1000 miners were killed with thousands more being captured as prisoners and thousands more lost their jobs. Not only were the miners crushed, but the attack was brutal, as the general in charge was the soon to be leader of the nationalists, Francisco Franco.

As the left watched the right crush a revolution, as well as seize more control of the government they were reminded of their German and Austrian comrades who had fallen to fascist regimes the year before. The Comintern<sup>3</sup> began advocating for the unification of leftist, and liberal groups to fight fascism in Spain, and all countries deemed to be threatened. As stated by the current Comintern leader Georgi Dimitrov, "*The fundamental and urgent task of the Communist Party in Spain and the Spanish proletariat was to ensure victory over fascism by completing the democratic revolution and isolating the fascists from the masses of the peasants and the urban petite bourgeoisie*" (Beevor 36). Dimitrov was also clear in his belief that it was necessary for the Communists to wait for the revolution and that they must stand under 'Securing the Republic' if they were to strengthen their side.

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<sup>2</sup> The term Revolution applies to the creation of a socialist or syndicalist state or system

<sup>3</sup> An international organisation of communist organisations, strongly influenced by the Soviet Union (USSR)

For the Republican ideology to triumph over the Nationalists they knew that unity was essential. It was because of this policy that the Republic government was less radical than many of their constituent groups. This was illustrated as Manuel Azaña stated they wanted to preserve liberty, justice, and the constitution; while focusing on “ *A great work of national restoration in defence of work and production, encouraging public works, and paying attention to the problems of unemployment and all the other points which had motivated the coalition of the republican and proletariat parties which is now in power.* ” Manuel Azaña, the president of the Republic from 1936-1939 was aware of the necessity of unity between parties, so was less radical in his approaches to governmental change. This is also shown in a speech he delivered on January 21, 1939, “*The regime that I desire is one where all the rights of conscience and of the human person are defended and secured by all the political machinery of the State, where the moral and political liberty of man is guaranteed, where work shall be, as the Republic intended it to be in Spain, the one qualification of Spanish citizenship, and where the free disposal of their country's destiny by the people in their entirety and in their total representation is assured.*” He is advocating for the ideas of a social democracy, not the unified workers councils, or dictatorship of the proletariat. His Republic has the key signs of trying to mix marxist ideas with the ideals of the liberal Republicans. The socialist welfare state is present, however no indication of collectivisation or class equality. While the President was more unifying, the Prime minister and head of the war ministry, Francisco Largo Caballero held a different view. In his own speech in March 1936 he clearly stated that, “*The illusion that the proletarian socialist revolution can be achieved by reforming the existing state must be eliminated. There is no course but to destroy its roots. Imperceptibly, the dictatorship of the proletariat or workers' democracy will be converted*

*into a full democracy, without classes from which the coercive state will gradually disappear. The instrument of the dictatorship will be the Socialist party, which will exercise this dictatorship during the period of transition from one society to another and as long as the surrounding capitalist states make a strong proletarian state necessary.*” The revolutionary ideas of Caballero were important in drumming support from the revolutionary socialists in the beginning, however they instilled fears that he could destroy the current unity. As the war began, his ideas on the necessity of strength shown through. He began to focus more on winning the war over the political revolution, something that made him even more unpopular among the left, prominently by the Anarchists.

Beyond the ideologies of the Republic, there was the very prominent ideology of the anarcho-syndicalists. Located prominently in the Catalan Region the anarchists<sup>4</sup> were one of the strongest left wing movements, and the most alienated. Unlike the socialists who could work with communists and even left Republicans, the anarchist far left from the Republicans and fundamentally opposed to the socialists. The leadership of the Anarcho-Syndicalists were centralised in the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) a large trade union and political organisation who held the most power over the anarchists. Their ideology advocated for directly fighting the fascists, and it was this resolve that was noticed by Ethal MacDonald, *“The struggle in Spain is maintained by the Anarchists and without the Anarchists the war would have been lost for the workers before this.”* The strength came from the strong base of supporters, as well as significant arms stores: *“The CNT has much better cadres and has many weapons, which were seized in the first days (the anarchists sent to the front fewer than 60 percent of the thirty*

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<sup>4</sup> In the context of Spain Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists are interchangeable

*thousand rifles and three hundred machine guns that they seized).*”(Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, October 14) These numbers not only illustrate the strength of a single leftist organisation, it serves as a reminder of the tensions between the anarchists and the socialists. These fractures serve as both a show of the scale of the triumph of a united left, but also the fragility and eventual tragedy of the whole situation. The Republican government was a force of great individual power. They were strong in their fight against fascism, they ignited they flames of the ideological war, but their triumph would ultimately lead to their tragedy.

The triumph of the Republic was its ability to unite many peoples under a single banner. The international brigades are the perfect illustration of the Republic at its peak. Whether the person was black or white, male or female, worker or student the spanish cause drew all. They had grandiose ideas, of a future that would be brighter than what they knew: *“We will crush them. We will build us a new society--a society of peace and plenty. There will be no color line, no jim-crow trains, no lynching. That is why, my dear, I'm here in Spain”* ( Frankson). These volunteers serve as a beacon of the power the republic was wielding and of what the Spanish people were fighting for: *“In Spain there are thousands of mothers like yourself who never had a fair shake in life. They got together and elected a government that really gave meaning to their life. But a bunch of bullies decided to crush this wonderful thing. That's why I went to Spain, Mom, to help these poor people win this battle, then one day it would be easier for you and the mothers of the future”* (Bailey). The volunteers served more as propaganda for the Republican cause than an effective military force. They were poorly trained and generally disunited from the rest of the governmental forces, contributing to their eventual demise.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The disbanding of the international volunteers is generally based on a political move to attempt to stop the aid of the nationalists from fascist nations.

The tragedy of the Republic is one of the modern failures of a democratic system, and highlights key aspects and issue in political philosophy and the left as a whole. The left suffered from the lack of a central, united ideology. As was described, an attempt was made with the Popular Front, but even this government fell apart under the conflicting ideas on the fate of Spain.

The largest and most significant clashes were between the communists and anarchists. The goals of the communists were to preserve the Republic, pursuing the goals of the USSR over the Spanish revolution: *"The whole comintern policy is now subordinated (excusably, considering the world situation) to the defence of the USSR."* (Orwell 56) The policy of the Soviets, (USSR) was to preserve the alliances within western Europe, which they believed would be hurt by a revolutionary Spain. On the other side the Anarchists didn't want to lose their power in the region, and believed the communists were trying to push them out. In speaking with Ilya Ehrenburg, a local anarchist stated, *"Communists and Socialists are hiding themselves in the rear and pushing the FAI-ists out of the cities and villages."* The increasing power of the socialists politically coincide with the rise of the UGT, a communist trade union: *"The UGT is now the strongest organization in Catalonia: it has no fewer than half the metallurgical workers and almost all the textile workers, municipal workers, service employees, bank employees. There are abundant links to the peasantry."* (Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, October 14) With power being stripped from them, the anarchists take more drastic measures to retain power and continue their revolution. The power plays have resulted in violent clashes and street fighting between those who are supposed to be allies. *"Not long ago in a settlement of Huesca near Barbastro twenty-five members of the UGT were killed by the anarchists in a surprise attack provoked by*

*unknown reasons*” (Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, October 14). Fighting between allied forces was detrimental to the effectiveness of the Republican military, as well as weakens the government and their ability to fight the Fascists. It reinforced the tragedy with the constant killing of civilians.

As the multitude of ideologies had its effects on the internal struggles, as demonstrated by the clashes in Catalonia, it also created issues on the front. With the International brigades now in the fight, the coordination between them and Spanish divisions was poor. The military constantly was ill prepared and unorganised. During a particular attack, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was ordered to attack a Moorish position with no support. The attack commenced as the commander of the brigade recalled, “a commander who hesitated during an offensive in Córdoba two months earlier had been shot as a Fascist spy” (Hochschild). An inability to control the Spanish military lead to the excessive deaths of volunteers and a general military inefficiency that cost them the war.

Through all of this, internal political tensions running high, Communists and Anarchists at each other's throats and fear spreading through the military brings the tragedy of the Republic full circle. It is estimated that throughout the war 55,000 people within the Republic were killed by fellow Republicans. Even with the executions of suspected fascist in this number, the amount of people who died from the political instability is a true tragedy and reflects the scale of the chaos. The failure of the Republic militarily, the oppression of the Franco regime can be partially attributed to them. With the fall of Madrid on March 28, 1939 the last flames of resistance were snuffed. The end of the war brought an end in the conflict, but brought the oppressive heel of a semi-fascist dictatorship. The Franco regime was responsible for the execution and persecution

of thousands of Republicans sympathisers. It is estimated that up to 200,000 Republicans were killed by the nationalists, excluding the soldiers on the front. Many of these deaths were in Spanish concentration camps or prisons from sickness or working to death. Many were shot or executed through gruesome rituals to remove Bolshevism, "*the rhetoric called for drastic surgery to save the body politic,*" (Beevor, 404). The nationalists were brutal to begin with, however, it was the Republic's inability to fight them effectively that ultimately led to the high death toll among Republicans, many of which were civilians. Of course it is impossible to say that a Republican victory would have been without similar casualties, however even during the war, the nationalists killed far more with 75,000 deaths being attributed to them compared to the 55,000.

The Spanish civil War was one of the most important and influential wars in the history of the world and the politics of Europe. The war was one of ideology and it was this factor that led to the grand triumphs and tragedies. The conflict presented in this war may have diminished and seem to be a thing of the past, however its lessons can be attributed to current political conflicts between left and right. Left unity will continue to be debated and argued for and against for the same reasons as illustrated in the war. We must understand the triumph of their fragile unity, but the tragedies of a failed cooperation. The Spanish Civil War shall always demonstrate the power of ideology on the world.

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