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Isabel Wagner, Seattle University, undergraduate student, “A Side Divided: The Role of Pre-Existing Republican Disunity in the Spanish Civil War”

Abstract: The Spanish Civil War, while between the Nationalists and Republicans, was riddled with a series of different groups which involved both Spanish and foreign players. On the Republican side there were a large number of different groups involved in resisting the Nationalist forces. There were Republican popular forces, but important parts of the resistance also included various communist, socialist, anarchist, and nationalist organizations from around the country. This paper argues that the Republican side of the Spanish Civil war was hindered in its effectiveness by dissent between and within these groups. This disuniting did not simply spring into existence. Disagreement in the Republicans existed long before the outbreak of civil war in 1936 and can be seen clearly in the social revolutions in Spain in the early 20th century, as well as in the class tensions during the 1920s and in the administration of the Second Spanish Republic. Through social history of the Spanish Civil War and oral history focusing on the lower class of Spain it is easy to see the dissatisfaction of various groups in Spain and the disconnect within the Republican side before the Spanish Civil War.

A Side Divided: The Role of Pre-Existing Republican Disunity in the Spanish Civil War

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On August 17, 1930 leaders from around Spain gathered in San Sebastian to talk about political change. It had only been a year since the deposition of military dictator Miguel Primo and the reconstitution of the monarchy under the reign of Alfonso XIII, and left-leaning forces saw a chance to take power. Socialists, communists, and many others came together in this agreement. At this meeting, leaders agreed to prepare for an uprising against the monarchy in an agreement called the Pact of San Sebastian.¹ Spanish historian Julian Casanova, in his writing about the Pact, said, “Together despite their noticeable differences in ideology and principles, they formed a comprehensive republican coalition, which came into being...in San Sebastian.”² This meeting was not official however, and no treaty or document was written or signed. This was simply an agreement between the left-leaning forces to band together in order to get rid of the monarchy. Despite the relative importance of this event, no written copy of the agreements made at San Sebastian exist and few newspapers reported on the event. Many historians have said that the Pact of San Sebastian was when the Republic coalesced. And yet only six years later would see the country thrust into a Civil War, and three years after that the world would see the fall of the Second Republic government and the rise of fascism in Spain under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco.

How did this happen? Part of the reason is because what some historians have hailed as unity in the years before the Civil War should be more accurately characterized as building tensions and disgruntlement. After the end of Franco’s dictatorship, historians were focused mainly on military and political history and so ignored social aspects that made it clear that the majority of the lower class, while fighting against Franco, were not fighting for the Republic. Through investigation of the social history, it is clear that problems between the lower class,

¹ Julián Casanova, *The Spanish Republic and Civil War*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 12.

² Casanova, 12.

mainly workers or farmers, and the Second Republic government in Spain, were the reason for the tension in the 1920s and 30s of Spain, and therefore a central factor in the failures in the effort to oppose Franco.

During the Spanish Civil War, the Republican side found themselves hindered in their effectiveness by dissent between and within the groups involved. However, this strife did not simply spring into existence. Disagreement in the Republicans existed long before the outbreak of civil war in 1936. It can be seen clearly in the social revolutions in Spain in the early 20th century, in the class tensions during the 1920s and the administration of the Second Spanish Republic. The groups that supported the Second Republic assumed that life would change drastically underneath this new government with key players within the Republican forces focusing on ideas of revolution during the Republic. However, this hope of change and revolution would not come to fruition. The Republic was determined to change but not in a revolutionary way. Tensions between liberal members, more conservative members of the Republic, and the rest of the trade unions as well as the political parties came to the forefront. Eventually, this led to a weakening of Republican forces and resulted in the success of Franco's Nationalist forces during the Spanish Civil War itself.

Spain in Turmoil in the Early 20th Century

The early 1900s in Spain was a time marked by instability and worker revolution. With the start of the 20th century came a rejection of the constitutional monarchy that had been in place since 1875 after the Carlist Wars. During this time the Spanish government had to deal with two main problems. One was the series of conflicts Spain was involved with in Morocco such as their colonial campaigns from 1909 to 1925. Another was the area of Catalonia in the northeastern part of Spain where, in response to the government's order of reinforcements to the

failing campaigns in Morocco, riots broke out called “The Tragic Week of Barcelona” in 1909. When the riots were finished, the Catalanian upper class was willing to compromise with the government, but the week had inspired the workers of Barcelona to fight against the regime.³

Worker resistance had already shown itself in the first decade of the 20th century but it started to increase dramatically. This resistance was accelerated by the benefit of an economic boom after World War I, in which Spain profited from their neutrality. This boom created an expanding industrial sector; quickly Spain started to modernize. However, with increased industrialization came a larger, urban, proletariat population. These two criteria combined created social disparities, especially in terms of class systems, and worker dissatisfaction. These building tensions reached a climax in 1917 with a revolutionary strike. Although this strike was put down by the Army it would set off a series of other riots and strikes that would continue for the next six years. Fear of worker revolution and the continued failures in the conflicts of Morocco led Alfonso XIII to accept an ultimatum offered by General Miguel Primo de Rivera to let him take control in 1923 in a military dictatorship.⁴ But the actions taken by Rivera simply exacerbated the problem. Primo banned all political parties and imprisoned those who protested his rule. His dictatorship exacerbated class tensions and combined with an economic decline in 1929 due to the Great Depression, led to Primo stepping down from his position after opposition to his rule from the populace and, more importantly, the military. King Alfonso attempted to govern but was left with a country that did not support a monarchy and was desperate for change in the light of economic, social and political problems.⁵

³ Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc, 1961), 14-15

⁴ Thomas, 16

⁵ Thomas, 17.

At this time people became more interested and involved in politics. The combination of urban explosion and increasing social disparities as well as the perceived weakness of the king due to his surrender to Primo in 1923 led to a surge of political engagement. Many in the lower class were involved in trade unions that had associated ties with four main political ideologies: anarchism, socialism, communism, and, for those in certain regions, nationalism. They clung to these political ideologies in hope of changing their lives. While most of these groups, such as the anarchists, were not represented in the governmental system, they were very popular with the people of Spain, especially among the lower class. All of these groups in their own way supported and fought for a revolution of Spanish society. Anarchists wanted the complete abolition of government systems. Communists and socialists focused on workers controlling the means of production, and nationalists desired their own government and state. These nationalists are not to be confused with Franco's nationalists. These supporters of an autonomous state will be referred to by the regions that had strong separatist movements at the time, Basque nationalists or Catalanian nationalists. But while all groups supported revolution in some shape or form, they differed in their support of the intensity of revolution. Revolution in this case meant either a complete change in the society such as refusing capitalist systems, abolishing the government entirely, or succeeding into their own state. During the war these groups had to deal with disagreements on when the revolution should be prioritized and what it included.⁶

At the time of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War there were countless numbers of trade unions all associated with different political ideologies. On the Republican side, the major players were the Popular Front army and the official Republican officials, typically moderates in the Republican party in the mid to upper class, who were already in place within the Second

⁶ Julián Casanova, *The Spanish Republic and Civil War*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 9-13.

Republic. But the rest of the players, and the ones I will discuss the most, were the numerous trade unions who represented the lower classes of Spain. In this essay the focus lies on four major political ideological groups: communists, socialists, anarchists, and Basque and Catalan nationalists.

While King Alfonso XIII attempted to gain support, the left-wing factions saw this as an opportunity to get rid of monarchical rule. At the meeting of San Sebastian in 1930 trade unions and political parties met to take steps to overthrow the monarchy. An agreement was reached but most information given to the public was through a note that was distributed after the meeting took place. This note referred to the meeting as a success with the left-wing groups forming a united coalition in a unanimous vote. Later newspapers printed an addendum to this mentioning that order to gain the support of Catalan nationalists, they would be allowed to put their case forward for autonomous rule after the fall of the monarchy.⁷ It is also necessary to point out that this meeting was not to create a new government system but simply an agreement of different political parties to work together to take down the monarchy. And so, the left-leaning groups of Spain were gathered together in a pact to take down the monarchy. Here, and later during the Second Republic, this coalition of left-wing groups was called the Popular Front. However, this meeting is proof of divided agendas among these left-wing groups. Moderate Republicans at the time had worries about including certain groups, especially the socialists and anarchists, because many of the Republicans did not welcome revolution to the same degree. Even socialists within their own party were wary such as Julián Besteiro, a prominent Spanish socialist politician. Besteiro "...was firmly against any such Socialist collaboration and spoke out several times,

⁷ Vicente Martín, "La prensa madrileña ante la llegada de la Segunda República," Phd diss, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2014, 122-126.

insisting that the republicans show themselves to be united and make clear their programme before requesting Socialist support.”⁸

This fear of unclear unity was founded because while the socialist groups of Spain eventually decided to ally themselves to the Republic, two months after the Pact, they did so merely as a way to have a say in the government. This decision is highlighted by Julian Casanova, a prominent Spanish historian: “An essential factor at that point was the attitude of Largo Caballero, who ended up convinced that the socialists had to help the republicans ‘to have an influence’ from within ‘on the orientation of the revolution’, and thus enable a peaceful and gradual move towards socialism.”⁹ In the end the Second Republic failed the different groups that supported them because they refused to make changes related to ideas of revolution. This failure to please the trade unions and political parties would create tensions that would quickly come to the forefront. The King eventually had to yield to obvious dislike from the people and held municipal elections in 1931 where Republicans defeated the Monarchists in all the large cities in Spain, such as Madrid and Barcelona. Due to the lack of support for the monarchy, the king abdicated the throne. The Second Republic was formed two days later on April 14, 1931.¹⁰

With the creation of the Second Republic people rejoiced around Spain. However, it was soon clear that the new Republican government was not going to be supportive of revolution or change especially when it came to labor rights. The government, while having the support of liberal groups, consisted mostly of more moderate liberal politicians and the reforms under the Second Republic were not sufficient enough in the eyes of the lower classes. This continued even in the later years of the Republic one year before the civil war. “The Popular Front pact was a

⁸ Paul Preston, *Coming of the Spanish Civil War: Reform, Reaction and Revolution in the Second Republic*, (Florence: Routledge, 1994), 28, Accessed March 17, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁹ Julián Casanova, *The Spanish Republic and Civil War*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 13.

¹⁰ Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc, 1961), 17-18.

republican-oriented minimal programme for continuing the reforms begun five years before at the start of the republic. It made no mention of socialism, and the left republicans explicitly rejected socialist calls for nationalization of the land and the banks, the establishment of unemployment benefits, and workers' control in industry.' ”¹¹ Lack of acceptable radical reform led to workers rapidly becoming disillusioned with the Second Republic. Other options unacceptable to the lower class such as the invitation of conservative parties into the government, such as CEDA (Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right), led to a revolutionary insurrection in October of 1934.

The insurrection of 1934 erupted in two major regions of Spain. In Barcelona, Catalan nationalist leader Lluís Companys declared a Catalan State of the Federal Spanish Republic and invited potential opposition to the government of the Second Republic to either join them or declare their own government. In Asturias, miners revolted and in three days were successful in creating committees of workers to control factories and revolutionary committees to control each town and provide necessities. This almost successful socialist revolution was eventually put down on government orders by the army commanded under Generals Goded and Francisco Franco. When it came to the February 1936 elections the Popular Front (or Second Republic) victory was only by a small margin in the popular vote.¹²

The Peoples' View of the Republic: Oral Histories

The Spanish Civil War began in July of 1936 when a large portion of the Spanish army staged a coup against the government of the Second Republic. The coup first began in Morocco on July 17th as military units on the mainland rose up to take control of cities mainly succeeding in Andalusia. As the Nationalist army won in Morocco they marched to the mainland and started

¹¹Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 44.

¹²Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc, 1961), 78-85.

gaining ground. Soon the country was divided into Nationalist and Republican areas and the two groups would fight for control of the country over the next three years until the end of the war in April 1939.¹³ It is clear that, from its inception, the Second Republic, despite the vague promises of the Pact of San Sebastian, was not loved by the lower class. In the words of Juan Moreno, a CNT laborer, he thought that, “Under the republic, under the political system, we workers would remain slaves of our bit of earth, of our work. Of course, one regime can give a bit more liberty than another, a little more freedom of expressions, but most things it can’t change. In many ways we were worse off under the republic than under the monarchy...”¹⁴ The constitution of the new Second Republic had stated that “‘Spain is a democratic Republic of workers of all classes, organized in a regime of liberty and justice.’”¹⁵ However, despite those words, the Second Republic, while not a dictatorship or a monarchy, still did not care nor attempt to fix problems for workers. The Agrarian Law was introduced in 1932 which allowed the state to seize unworked estates over 56 acres that could then be distributed to individual or co-operatives of rural peasants. However, this law only applied to Andalusia, Estremadura, three provinces of Castile, and Albacate. The law did not deal with other areas in Spain that were drastically in need of help. And although Catalonia and Basque were able to choose some measure of self-government, many citizens expected far more powers would have been granted.¹⁶

The start of the Spanish revolution was a valve released on the tension that had been festering in Spain since the beginning of the 20th century. The anger of workers and farmers in the villages due to continued problems of low pay made it so that they immediately took news of the coup as an opportunity of resistance against the upper-class landowners. An example of this

¹³ Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc, 1961), 131-138.

¹⁴Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 97.

¹⁵ Thomas, 46.

¹⁶ Thomas, 51-55.

was seen in the town of Baena, an agricultural town close to Cordoba. On July 19th, only two days after the start of the military coup, the guardia civil of the town proclaimed martial law. What came after was a rapid descent into violence. A baker's son, Manuel Castro remembered that "It was the workers against the bosses. Hatred had reached boiling point. For the past eighteen months the labourers had been demanding higher wages, and many landowners had stopped working their land, saying life was impossible... Wearing a tie was enough to arouse hatred; it was a symbol of someone who didn't have to earn a day-wage. The labourers thought that everyone ought to have to work for a living, ought to be equal. That's what they were fighting for."¹⁷ Mere days after the coup the rest of Spain was rapidly being divided into Nationalist and Republicans and this typically happened across class lines. Continued strained tensions between landowners and the landless meant that at the signs of fighting the lower class took the advantage given to them to try and change their economic fate, which the Second Republic had been unable to provide. This division proves that what agrarian reform the Second Republic passed was not effective in making lives better for the laborers of Spain.

This trend of groups acting for their own needs is seen in the actions of the Basque nationalists at the very beginning of the civil war. With news of the army uprising in Morocco, Juan Ajuriaguerra, the president of the Basque national party (PNV), said that, "The right was ferociously hostile to any autonomy statute for the Basque country. The legal government, on the other hand, had promised it to us and we knew we would receive it in the end. At 6 a.m., after a sleepless night, we reached a unanimous decision. We issued a statement declaring our support of the republican government. We reached the decision without much joy but convinced that we

¹⁷ Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 271-272.

had chosen the side which most favored the interests of the Basque people...”¹⁸ It is clear that the Basque nationalists support for the Second Republic was for self-preservation and protection of their interests. Political aspirations of each group were one of the main problems in terms of disagreements for the Republicans. And although the PNV eventually did side with the Republicans, it is more important to understand why they made that choice, which was to advance their own agenda. The Second Republic would have to deal with an inability to satisfy both groups in Spain with churches and the military on the conservative side and trade unions and socialists on the liberal side. And although the Republic had these left-wing groups on their side their unity was not strong enough. Differing ideas on the changes that needed to be made in Spanish society and government meant that the Republican forces made an ineffective opposition to Nationalist forces. The Nationalists, while composed of different groups, still had better luck with unity due to the agreement on a common goal of creating a new capitalist government while the Republican groups argued over focusing on creating a government or creating revolution.

Continued Disunity

Although the civil war started because of differing ideals between Republicans and Nationalists, the most important differences, and the most effective at disuniting, were the ones within Republican forces. This lack of unity was clear not only during the civil war but in the government of the Second Republic and even in the years of the Spanish monarchy. The resentment that lay between left wing groups and the Republican government and each other, as well as the Republican government’s continued opposition to worker revolution throughout the civil war, were strong reasons for the defeat of the Republicans at the hands of the Nationalists and the rise of Francisco Franco’s dictatorship.

¹⁸Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 57.

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