

# Unit 3: Spanish Civil War 1936-1939



# What will we cover in this unit

- Long-term causes of the Spanish civil war
- Short-term causes of the Spanish civil war
- What occurred during the Spanish Civil War
- The effects of the Spanish Civil war.



# The short-term causes of the Spanish Civil War

Key Question:

To what extent should the Republican Government between 1931-1936 be blamed for the failure to prevent civil war?



# Background

- In 1931, Spain became a republic. The new republican government faced a number of serious social, economic and political problems.
- The failure of a successive governments to provide a satisfactory solution to these problems led to the outbreak of civil war in 1936.
- This failure was not solely due to the context in which they were operating made the provision of stable government extremely difficult.





**THE GOVERNMENTS OF THE  
SECOND SPANISH REPUBLIC  
1931-1936**

# The governments of the Second Spanish Republic 1931-1936

- The short-lived Spanish Republic underwent significant changes in governments between 1931-1936. The three major elections held in this period resulted in dramatic swings between left- and right-wing governments, all of which were **coalitions**:
  - Left-wing coalition government (June 1931 to November 1933)
  - Right-wing coalition government (November 1933 to February 1936)
  - Left-wing coalition government, known as the Popular Front (February 1936 to July 1936)
- **\*Coalitions** – Government formed of a combination of political parties.



# The governments of the Second Spanish Republic 1931-1936

- Substantial problems confronted the government of the Spanish Republic in 1931. These problems included:
  - The lack of a tradition of working democracy
  - Opposition from the monarchists hostile to the Republic
  - Opposition from extreme right-wing groups, like the Falange, who did not believe democracy could solve Spain's problems.
  - Serious socioeconomic divisions which meant that any reforming action would leave at least one section of society dissatisfied.
- \***Falange** – Fascist political party established in February 1933 by Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera, the son of Miguel Primo de Rivera.

# The governments of the Second Spanish Republic 1931-1936

- Substantial problems confronted the government of the Spanish Republic in 1931. These problems included:
  - The rise of political extremism in Europe, evident in the establishment of right-wing dictatorships in Italy and Germany.
  - The fear of communist revolution, encouraged by the USSR; many conservatives in Spain interpreted any social reforms as a step towards communism.





# The governments of the Second Spanish Republic 1931-1936

- In addition, the Great Depression had just begun. This profoundly disrupted the world economy and worsened the socioeconomic crisis in Spain. During the Great Depression in Spain:
  - Imports and exports dropped significantly, the former halving by 1935 from 1929 levels; exports were reduced by only slightly less.
  - Industrial productivity decreased, with **gross domestic product** decreasing by 20 percent in the 1930s
  - Unemployment rates rose to 12.9 percent in 1934
  - Government investment decreased.
- **\*Gross domestic product** – The market value of all goods and services produced in a country in a given time period.

# **THE LEFT-WING GOVERNMENT'S REFORMS 1931-1933**



# The left-wing government's reforms 1931-1933

- The June 1931 elections were a resounding triumph for the left-wing parties.
- Of the 470 seats in parliament, the Spanish Socialist Party, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), won 116, making them the largest party represented.
- This, however was insufficient to ensure the passage of legislation, necessitating they form a coalition government.
- They joined other left-wing parties including the second largest party, the Radical Party led by Alejandro Lerroux, to form a government.
- The moderate Niceto Alcalazamora was chosen as President. The right-wing parties held only 41 seats.

# Limitations of the reforms 1931-1933

- Although the reforms achieved much, they fell short of solving many of the problems they set out to address. The Agrarian Reform Law in its first year only succeeded in resettling 10 per cent of the 60,000 families it had aimed to help.
- In large part this was because the Institute of Agrarian Reform was allocated an inadequate 50 million pesetas (one percent of the annual budget) with which to carry out the reform, including the compensation payouts.
- The Law of Obligatory Cultivation was frequently ignored by landlords, in part because they only incurred minimal fines (frequently not exceeding 500 pesetas) for so doing.

# Limitations of the reforms 1931-1933

- Rural labourers continued to suffer considerable hardship, and by the early 1930s, 72% of those registered unemployed were from agricultural regions.
- Unemployment also remained a substantial problem in urban areas. Social security benefits provided only limited assistance to industrial workers, and did not cover those who were out of work.



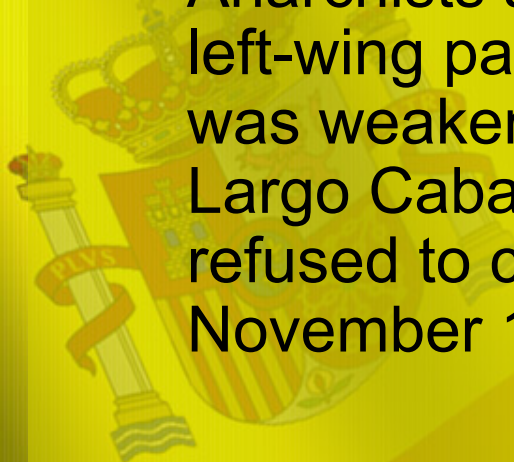
# Political reactions to the reforms 1931-1933

- The reforms generated criticism from both the extreme left and the conservative right. The government became isolated and weakened as Spain's politics polarized and it was abandoned by the extreme left and attacked by a strengthened conservative right. In the general election of November 1933, the left wing coalition government was voted out of power.



# Opposition from the extreme left

- The government's defeat in the November 1933 elections was in significant part due to the loss of support from elements of the more extreme left that had formerly backed the government. These included anarchists and the left-wing faction of the PSOE, which was led by Largo Caballero. To these groups, the government's reforms did not go far enough to address Spain's socioeconomic problems. In consequence, their opposition grew.
- Anarchists abstained from voting rather than give the left-wing parties of the coalition their vote. The PSOE was weakened by divisions caused by criticisms from Largo Caballero's left-wing faction, many of whom refused to co-operate with other left-wing parties in the November 1933 elections, dividing the left-wing vote.



# Opposition from the extreme left

- One of the main reasons why the November general elections were called at all was because of a breakdown in co-operation between, and within, the coalition parties which made effective, stable government almost impossible.
- This persuaded President Alcalá-Zamora to use his power to dissolve the parliament and call new elections. The breakdown of the coalition was prompted by the reform programme, in particular the agrarian reforms.





The background features a large, semi-transparent watermark of the Spanish flag and its coat of arms. The flag's colors (red, white, and gold) are visible as a wavy pattern across the top and bottom. The coat of arms, including the crown and scepter, is positioned on the left side, partially overlapping the text.

**RIGHT-WING REPUBLICAN  
GOVERNMENT, NOVEMBER 1933  
TO FEBRUARY 1936**

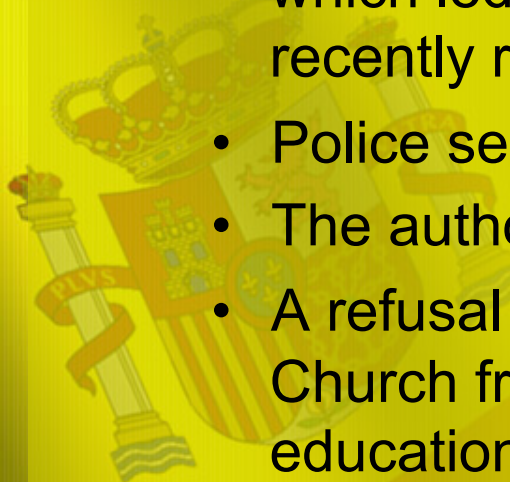
# Right-wing Republican government, November 1933 to February 1936

- In November 1933 elections, CEDA became the largest party in the parliament with 115 deputies. They worked closely with the second largest party, the Radicals, who had shifted considerably to the right since 193.



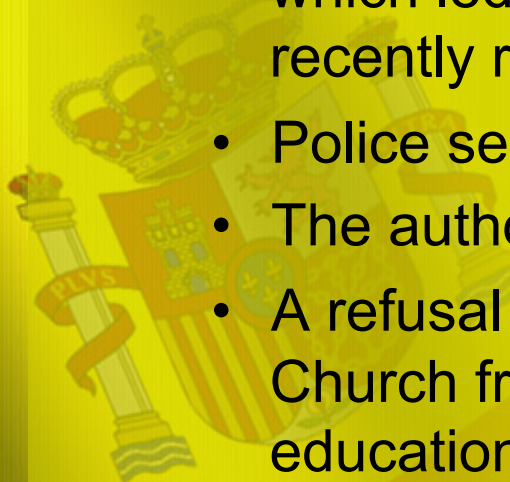
# Reforms of the right-wing Republic 1933-1936

- The period of right-wing government saw the reversal of much of the legislation passed by the earlier left-wing government. Their actions included:
  - The repeal of the Law of Municipal boundaries in May 1934
  - A refusal to enforce most of the agrarian and industrial reforms, including undermining arbitration committees which led to the eviction of peasant farmers who had recently received land from the reforms.
  - Police searches of trade unions premises
  - The authorization of force to break up strikes
  - A refusal to enforce laws that separated the Catholic Church from the state, allowing it to take control of education.



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# The Asturias Uprising, October 1934





Galicia

Asturias

Cantabria

Basque  
Country

Navarre

La Rioja

Castile and Leon

Aragon

Madrid

Castile -  
- La Mancha

Extremadura

Valencian  
Community

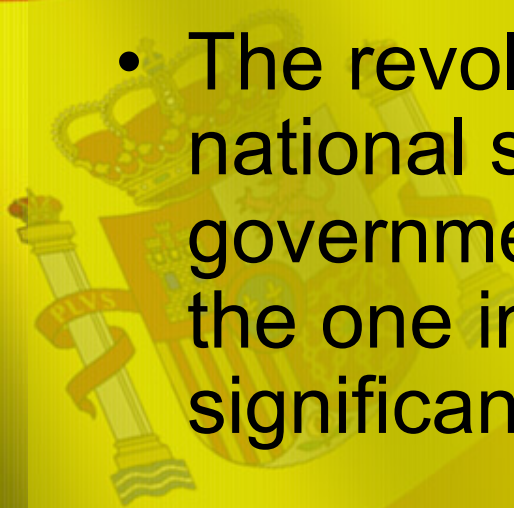
*Portugal*

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# The Asturias Uprising, October 1934

- The left-wing parties and their supporters were alarmed by the reforms of the right-wing government.
- Left-wing protests against the government increased.
- The most serious uprising took place in Asturias in October 1934.
- The revolt was intended to be part of a larger national socialist uprising to remove the government, but poor planning meant that the one in Asturias was the only one of significance.



# The Asturias Uprising, October 1934

- The Asturias was predominantly a mining region that had suffered severely from the effects of the great depression.
- Hundreds of mines had been closed in the 1920s, resulting in high unemployment.
- The agenda of the far left therefore held significant appeal.
- During the revolt of October 1934, many of the workers succeeded in establishing an independent workers' republic exercising control over one-third of the province and 80 percent of its population.
- There was violence, with revolutionaries burning 58 churches as well as taking hostages, 31 of whom they killed.



# The Asturias Uprising, October 1934

- The reaction of the right-wing government was brutal and within two weeks the revolt was ended with 1335 killed and almost 3000 wounded; most of these were from the Asturias.
- Government suppression continued and broadened, even after the surrender of the Asturian rebels on October 19, 1934.
- Catalan autonomy was suspended and thousands of left-wing activists were arrested throughout the region.





# The end of the right-wing government January 1936



# The end of the right-wing government January 1936

- The right-wing government came to an end when President Alcalá Zamora dissolved the parliament and called a general election for February 1936.
- His decision was precipitated by the virtual collapse of cooperation between the Radical and the CEDA partnership, a situation that made government almost unworkable.
- The breakdown in this partnership was in large part over policy since the Radical Party became increasingly unsupportive of the CEDA's more extreme right-wing position.

Popular Front government, February –  
July 1936



# Popular Front government, February – July 1936

- The general election of February 1936 resulted in another left-wing government.
- The victorious coalition, known as the Popular Front, was a broad union of left-wing parties including republicans, socialist and communists.
- The Popular Front held a substantial majority in the parliament with 286 seats, in comparison to the 132 seats held by the right.
- However, this distribution of seats, which was in accordance with the rules of the electoral system, obscured the closer split of opinion in Spain.
- This split was revealed in the division of actual votes cast, which was 4,654,116 for the left, 4,503,524 for the right.

# Reforms of the Popular Front government

- The Popular Front government resumed the left-wing reformist agenda:
  - The restoration of Catalan autonomy
  - Discussion of granting autonomy to Basque country
  - The resumption of Agrarian and Military reforms.



# Opposition from the conservative right

- These reforms were opposed by the conservative right and there was almost immediate escalation in right-wing inspired violent protest.
- Many of the more extreme elements of the conservative right expressed frustration with the democratic system and began to advocate a more militant approach to gaining power.
- Indeed, there was an abortive right-wing plot involving Gil-Robles, the leader of the CEDA Party, to prevent the Popular Front government from even taking power at all.
- Further evidence of the rightist drift to extremism was significant increase in membership to the explicitly anti-democratic and fascist Falange Party from 1936.



# Opposition from the conservative right

- The conservative right were encouraged into greater opposition by the increasingly radical rhetoric of the extreme left.
- Conservative politicians claimed a right-wing government was the only way to restore and preserve order in Spain.
- On the streets, right-wing militants provoked left-wing groups to violence to justify claims that they were needed to prevent lawlessness.

# Opposition from the conservative right

- The assassination of the right-wing monarchist leader Jose Calvo Sotelo on July 13, 1936 by government troops confirmed for many that left-wing violence needed to be stopped, by force if necessary.



# Opposition from the extreme left

- The Popular Front government faced opposition from increasingly extreme left-wing militancy.
- This was motivated in part by what these groups saw as an opportunity to exact vengeance on landlords and employers who had used the previous two years of right-wing government to exploit workers and peasants.
- Extreme left-wing unions encouraged laborers who had been victims of eviction to take undertake illegal occupations to reclaim land, resulting in mass land seizures which were later made legal by the government.

# Opposition from the extreme left

- The increased militancy of the left was also consequence of worsening conditions due to poor harvests and unemployment.
- The rhetoric of the leader of the left-wing faction of the PSOE, Largo Cabalero, became increasingly extreme, speaking of a social revolution.
- The governments ability to provide stable rule was weakened by political divisions within its ranks.

# Opposition from the extreme left

- The rift within the PSOE became so serious that the left-wing faction led by Caballero refused to participate in the government on the grounds that any coalition would dilute the social reform agenda they wished to pursue.
- In addition, animosity between the leaders of the competing PSOE factions, Caballero and Indalecio Prieto, resulted in Caballero's supporters vetoing Prieto's appointment as prime minister in May 1936.

# Opposition from the extreme left

- The new Prime Minister Santiago Casares Quirogo underestimated the seriousness of the political situation and failed to save the fragmenting Popular Front.



# Military uprising July 1936



# Military uprising July 1936

- Throughout 1936, both the extreme left and extreme right had spoken increasingly of revolution as the only solution to Spain's crisis.
- But it was the conservative right who decisively abandoned the path of legality when members of the military launched an uprising against the Popular Front government in July 1936.





# Military uprising July 1936

- The revolt had its roots primarily in the army and was chiefly planned by General Emilio Mola.
- Most colonels and middle ranking officers supported the revolt, bringing their garrisons with them.
- The Spanish Military Union was a secretive organization of over 3500 officers that played a key role in the establishment of cells of conspirators throughout the country.

# Military uprising July 1936

- General Mola also recognized the importance of civilian support and established links with monarchists and CEDA to ensure their participation.
- The revolt began with troops in Morocco on 17 July 1936 and soon spread to military units throughout Spain.
- This action met with armed resistance from left-wing unions, particularly in the south and in key cities of Barcelona and Madrid.
- These unions quickly mobilized civilians into militia units and joined with troops loyal to the Republic.
- The result was that rebellious garrisons were only able to take control of parts of Spain.
- Civil war had begun.

# Debate

- The class should divide into groups or pairs with one group representing far-left anarchist and socialist groups in pre-civil war Spain, and the other far-right groups.
- Prepare for a debate in which you will discuss the extent to which the far left or the far right bears more responsibility for causes the civil war in Spain.



# End of Section Notes

Found these on the internet that could help you study for exams



# Left-wing coalition government 1931-33

- First major election resulted in a left-wing coalition government.
- Passed a series of reforms that aimed to address problems of rural inequality, unemployment and exploitation of labor.
  - Agrarian reforms: reduce working hours and increase employment.
  - Anti-clerical reforms: reduce Church's power and monopoly.
  - Military reforms: reduce size and closure of military academy in Zaragoza.
  - Urban workers reforms: reduce working hours and increase employment.
  - Separatist reforms: Catalonia given limited autonomy.



# Left-wing coalition government 1931-33

- BUT, reforms were limited and fell short of solving the problems.
  - Agrarian reform law in its first year only succeeded in resettling 10% of 60,000 it aimed to help.
  - Law of obligatory cultivation frequently ignored by landlords and unemployment still high.
  - Catalonia granted very limited autonomy and no provision made for Basque country.



# Left-wing coalition government 1931-33

- Reforms generated criticism from both left and right coalition voted out in November 1933 elections.
  - Loss of support by extreme left (reforms did not go far enough).
  - Division within coalition itself (over pace and extremity of reforms and anti-clerical laws).
  - Laborer and workers dissatisfied with effects of reform program.
  - Right feared that reforms were steps towards socialist reform – could lead to communism.
    - Growth of right opposition came in form of CEDA, which grew rapidly in popularity.
  - Military also against reforms – fearful of a purge of the army.



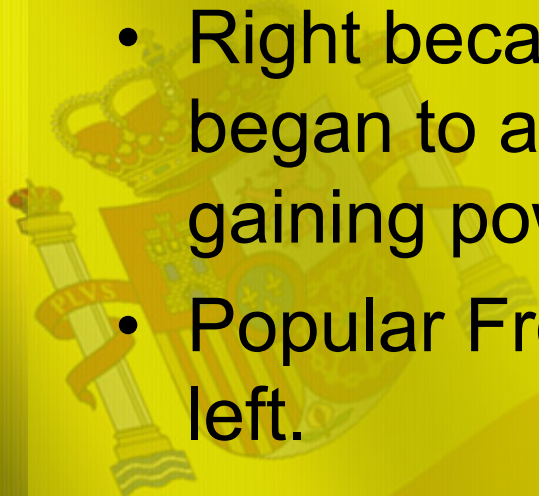
# Right-wing republican government 1933-36

- Period saw reversal of much of reforms of previous republic.
- Left-wing parties alarmed by reforms by government increased strikes.
  - Asturias Uprising 1934: serious uprising against government. Reaction of government was brutal, over 1000 killed, Catalan autonomy suspended.
- Breakdown in relations between Radical party and CEDA led to collapse of parliament and government → elections were called.



# Popular Front government 1936

- Election resulted in another left-wing republic.
- Popular Front was broad coalition of various left-wing groups.
- Resumed left-wing reformist agenda:
  - Restoration of Catalan autonomy.
  - Resumption of agrarian and military reforms.
- Right became frustrated and extremist elements began to advocate more militant approach to gaining power.
- Popular Front faced opposition from extreme left.



# Popular Front government 1936

- Worsening conditions due to poor harvest and unemployment led to rise in militancy of the left.
- Government's ability to provide stable rule weakened by internal divisions.
- Analysis:
  - Civil war came about, partly, as a result of failure to deliver reforms by three republic government from 1931-36. Living conditions, economic conditions did not improve and caused dissatisfaction amongst the general populous and the more extreme elements of both the left and right. The polarization of politics and the divisions within Spanish society coupled with these failed reforms helped bring around ideas of revolution from both extreme left and right, which in turn brought around the civil war.



# Military rising July 1936

- Both extreme left and extreme right had spoken about revolution.
- The murder of José Sotelo hastened preparations for a military coup 1936 led by generals Sanjuro and Mola + Foreign Legion.
- Revolt began with troops in Morocco and spread to military units throughout Spain.
- This action met with armed resistance from left-wing unions, particularly in rural south and Barcelona and Madrid.
- As a result, army was only able to take control of parts of Spain, bringing the country into a civil war.

# Conclusion

- Civil war came about, in the end, from the deep-seated divisions within Spanish society.
- These early divisions helped polarise politics and the country so that, when the republic governments were formed, it was almost impossible to please both the moderate left and right, let alone the extreme elements.
- This in turn led to revolutionary ideas spreading, before the assassination of José Sotelo sparked plans by the military in Morocco to stage a coup.
- Therefore, the long-term economic and social problems of Spain laid the foundations for a future, and arguably inevitable, conflict.