Arming the People Against Revolution

Origins of the Spanish Civil War.

The Second Spanish Republic (1931–1939) suffered one of the most accelerated cases of democratic decline in European history. In 1931, Spain established a liberal, republican, democratic constitution on a wide basis of popular and elite support. In just a few years, the constitution was in ruins and Spain was at war with itself. How did this happen? Too often, Americans are taught a simplistic morality tale about this period: the fascists destroyed democracy. But the true story of Spain’s troubled republic is much more interesting and instructive. It shows how democratic regimes can die from self-inflicted wounds.

Stanley Payne, professor emeritus of history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has spent his career studying the Second Spanish Republic and its aftermath. After completing his master’s degree at the Claremont Graduate School and receiving his doctorate from Columbia University in 1960, he first published scholarly studies of the Spanish far Right. He was one of the first historians to examine the causes of the Spanish Civil War, at a time when most writing on the subject was mired in partisan propaganda. Having established himself as an expert on modern Spanish history, Payne advised Congress during Spain’s transition to democracy in the 1970s. Writing in both English and Spanish, he has published almost 200 popular and academic articles on Spanish, Portuguese, and European history, and nearly 20 books on Spain. He has received dozens of awards and an honorary doctorate from Universidad CEU Cardenal Herrera. Because Payne approaches his subject with objectivity, rigor, and sobriety, Spaniards accord him (a non-native) an unusual respect. Even on such a delicate topic as the civil war, they acknowledge him to be one of the foremost authorities. He takes political history seriously, and that itself makes him an outlier among most historians. He has his audience in Spain and several of his books are bestsellers there, but he deserves a wider one in the United States.

Some historians trace Spain’s rapid political decay to the failure of its liberal reforms. Others, such as the late Juan Linz of Yale, blame institutional conflict. Still others, including Paul Preston of the London School of Economics, hold that the republic’s collapse originated in longstanding rightist conspiracies. The Franco regime’s official line was that the collapse began with a Communist plot to bring down the republic, justifying General Franco’s rebellion. Payne makes a different argument, finding the cause of conflict in the eruption of revolutionary politics—and showing the ongoing danger this form of politics can pose.

In Civil War in Europe, 1905–1949 (2011), Payne examines Spain in light of Europe’s cycle of revolutionary civil wars that made the first half of the 20th century so violent. Most civil wars before the 20th century concerned either succession—conflicts between potential heirs—or secession—such as the American
Civil War. In the 20th century a new, revolutionary kind of civil war arose in Europe, pitting irreconcilable conceptions of state, society, and culture against each other. In these conflicts, revolutionaryaries and counterrevolutionaries aimed to establish radically different regimes. Payne is fond of quoting Joseph de Maistre’s dictum: “the counterrevolution is not the opposite of a revolution, but is an opposing revolution.” Once the revolutionary process begins, the old regime is finished. Both revolutionaryaries and counterrevolutionaries—who are ostensibly interested in restoring the status quo ante—must find a new regime. As Carl Schmitt observes in Ex Captitate Salus (1950), the determination of both sides to establish a new regime is the reason why revolutionary civil wars bring unprecedented levels of violence. The goal is to overturn the whole legal and political order associated with the enemy, leading to the call for the enemy’s absolute elimination.

What accounts for the rise of revolutionary politics in Europe in the 1920s and ’30s? Some scholars stress the social and economic shocks of World War I and the Great Depression; others, the absence of liberal traditions across the half-formed democracies that collapsed during those decades. Payne grants that these theses explain some of Europe’s revolutions. But the Spanish case calls into question their overall explanatory power. Spain’s liberal and parliamentary traditions stretched back to the start of the 19th century. Moreover, the country had stayed out of the First World War and suffered relatively little economic damage during the Great Depression. No exogenous shocks explain the rise of revolutionary politics in Spain, the fall of the Spanish Republic, and the civil war. The Spanish brought revolution upon themselves.

Though a variety of parties helped set the revolution going, Payne argues that the chief culprits were the Spanish socialists. Unlike Bolsheviks, who seek to overthrow liberal constitutionalism by direct means, revolutionary socialists use the constitutional system to provide cover for their plan to dismantle it. They don’t overthrow the legal system, they exploit it. Legalists of the center and the Right struggled to respond to this tactic. In Spain, their failure was particularly acute. In The Collapse of the Spanish Republic, 1933–1936, Payne describes Spain’s descent into a brutal three-year war as the result of the socialist Left’s brazen meeting the center’s carelessness and the Right’s pusillanimity.

Other European socialist movements began with revolutionary ambitions but dwindled as they grew older and came to respect constitutionalism and parliamentary norms. Over time, Spanish socialists became more radical. The most important leftist leader in Spain, Manuel Azaña (prime minister from 1931 to 1933 and again in 1936), contended that liberalism failed because it was too willing to compromise. He regarded the republican constitution as the beginning of a radical reform project—even calling it a “revolution.” Politicians who didn’t equate constitutionalism with liberalism were ipso facto illegitimate.

To Spanish socialists, the Right—which failed to save the monarchy in the 1920s and never articulated a different constitutional basis for the new republic—was a spent force. They were therefore shocked at the result of the 1933 election, when a seemingly stable left-wing coalition collapsed and the Right unexpectedly won. Assured that history was on their side, but now convinced that it needed a strong nudge to stay on course, the motivation of leftists became, in Payne’s assessment, a “visceral” desire to stay in power: “One way or the other, they were planning to hold onto it.”

Three factors led to the collapse of the Spanish Republic. First, there was no agreement on the rules of the political game. The majority party on the Right, the Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Rights (CEDA), won the 1933 election. Though its leaders engaged in rhetorical excesses and flirted with unspecified constitutional changes, they abstained from violence, even when supporters were assaulted and murdered by the Left. Yet the Left refused to accept CEDA’s electoral victory. The president of the republic, Niceto Alcalá-Zamora, had to reject four requests from the Left to cancel the elections. Eventually Zamora established a minority government of centrists. But the goalposts had shifted. Republicanism had come to mean that the Right could never form a legitimate government.

Second, the center and center-Left enabled the descent into revolutionary politics by winking at the Left’s violence and punishing the Right’s. The rise of the “anti-fascist” trope in the 1930s, recounted in Paul Gottfried’s excellent Antifascism: The Course of a Crusade (2021)—which Payne himself has recently praised in an essay for First Things—served to stymie anyone who disagreed with the Left. In Spain, it excused the violence of young socialists. Centrist authorities were unable or unwilling to stop attacks on private property, businesses, churches, convents, and clergy. Instead, they blamed the victims, arresting not the actual perpetrators but scapegoating monarchists and conservatives. As cultural theorist René Girard understood, this scapegoating does not break the cycle of violence, but intensifies it. When revolutionaries attempt to purify a corrupt state and society through scapegoating, those whom they kill become martyrs, whose sacrifice becomes redemptive for nascent counterrevolutionaries. In Spain, scapegoating monarchists and conservatives converted large sections of the population from apathy to anger. By letting murders go unpunished and unjustly punishing innocents, the Left created martyrs throughout Spain—galvanizing the counterrevolution and turning the conflict into a religious war.

The centrist government assumed that only the Right threatened the republic. This was a bizarre position to take after October 1934, when socialists launched the most organized and well-armed insurrection in interwar western and central Europe. A revolt broke out in 15 of Spain’s 50 provinces, in some places lasting for weeks. The insurrection failed—with nearly 2,000 killed in the uprising and more than 15,000 rebels arrested—but after a strong initial response, the centrist coalition went soft. Hundreds of revolutionaries, guilty of capital crimes, were prosecuted; only two were executed. Though the Socialist Party had organized the insurrection, it was never outlawed. Just over a year later, its participants were allowed to stand for election, giving them the opportunity to gain legally the power they had failed to seize by force. By contrast, in the years that followed the Falange—a tiny far-Right fringe party that won 0.7% of the vote in the February 1936 elections—was subject to concerted political persecution. But this double standard had the
opposite effect of what it intended. When the Falange was officially suppressed in the spring of 1936, its underground movement became far larger than the legal party ever had been.

The third factor in the collapse of the republic was the centrist endorsement of unconstitutional action in the name of saving the so-called liberal consensus—what French political theorist Pierre Manent has called “the fanaticism of the center.” In The Collapse of the Spanish Republic, Payne is especially critical of President Zamora in this regard. Placing himself above normal parliamentary procedure, Zamora manipulated the system to encourage a centrist party to emerge. In 1933, he had already disregarded the fundamental parliamentary convention of giving the head of the largest party (CEDA) the opportunity to form a government. Disregarding even the second-largest party of the Left, he asked instead the small party of centrists to take charge. CEDA was invited to become a junior partner in a coalition government. To be sure, there is some discretion in a parliamentary system for the president to select the prime minister. And CEDA, afraid of appearing too aggressive, acquiesced to this unconventional arrangement. Yet after late 1935, Zamora’s manipulations became particularly egregious. When the centrists were passing some controversial administrative reforms in September 1935 and several cabinet members resigned, Zamora could have offered the coalition partner, CEDA, the chance to form a government—or simply let the prime minister appoint new cabinet ministers. Instead, he handed the premiership to an independent.

When, after three months, this government fell and the centrists were too embroiled in financial scandals to take the reins, Zamora could have given CEDA its chance. Yet he turned over the premiership to an old crony of his, Manuel Portela Valladares, who did not even have a seat in parliament. In the name of protecting centrism, Zamora was pushing de facto regime change. He was transforming a parliamentary regime (which defers to the largest political parties in the legislature), into a semi-presidential one (in which the president unilaterally chooses the prime minister). His actions were not only sabotaging the constitution. They were also radicalizing leftists and rightists, as they became convinced they would never be allowed to form a government. Finally, unable to secure parliamentary support for Portela’s government, Zamora administered his coup de grâce: despite parliament having two more years to sit, he called new elections. With both Left and Right distrusting the center, the election in February 1936 became a regime-change plebiscite, a choice between a leftist republic that excluded the center and Right on the one hand, and some version of a rightist republic on the other.

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The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us About Great-Power Rivalry Today

Hal Brands
January 25, 2022
Publisher: Yale University Press
ISBN: 978-0-300-2-5078-7

The United States is entering an era of great-power competition with China and Russia. Such global struggles happen in a geopolitical twilight, between the sunshine of peace and the darkness of war. In this innovative and illuminating book, Hal Brands argues that America should look to the history of the Cold War for lessons in how to succeed in great-power rivalry today. Exploring how America won a previous twilight struggle is the starting point for determining how America can successfully prosecute another high-stakes rivalry today.

The Administrative State Before the Supreme Court: Perspectives on the Nondelegation Doctrine

Edited by Peter J. Wallison and John Yoo
March 2022
Publisher: AEI Press

The Administrative State Before the Supreme Court presents arguments from leading legal scholars on how the nondelegation doctrine can be revived. Each author analyzes a unique facet on the applicability of this doctrine and the role it can play in restoring balance to the American constitutional system.

The Right: The Hundred-Year War for American Conservatism

Matthew Continetti
April 19, 2022
Publisher: Basic Books

In The Right, Matthew Continetti gives a sweeping account of modern conservatism’s evolution, from the Progressive Era through the present. He tells the story of how conservatism began as networks of intellectuals, developing and institutionalizing a vision that grew over time, until they began to buckle under new pressures, resembling national populist movements. Drawing out the tensions between the desire for mainstream acceptance and the pull of extremism, Continetti argues that the more one studies conservatism’s past, the more one becomes convinced of its future.
1936 there was still no rebellion, but as Payne observes, ordinary Spaniards were enduring far more abuse from their government than the American colonists in 1776. Arson, assaults, arbitrary arrests, and political violence surged across the country.

On July 13, 1936, the principal leader of the monarchist party and a sitting member of parliament, José Calvo Sotelo, was kidnapped and murdered by socialist members of the state police. This outrage—part of the state apparatus killing one of the people’s own representatives—was unprecedented in the history of European parliamentary regimes. The government responded not by arresting those responsible but by shutting down right-wing meeting centers and rounding up Falangists. Yet the impartiality of the state was fatally compromised; it was now seen to be openly aiding and abetting partisan murder. The constitution was broken. At that point, Payne writes, not rebelling appeared more dangerous for many than rebelling.

Francisco Franco is commonly denounced as the general who led a fascist coup d’etat against a democratic republic. But as Payne observes in Franco: A Personal and Political Biography (2014; co-written with Jesús Palacios), “the only accurate part of this claim is that he was a general.” By July 1936 the republic was a hollowed-out corpse. The Popular Front had killed it. The chief organizers of the rebellion against the republic enlisted Franco because of his military prowess (he had become the youngest general in Europe after his successful campaigns in Spanish Morocco), and because of his professional and political reputation (he was regarded as a man of the moderate Right). Only in June 1936 did Franco agree to participate in a revolt, and as late as July 12 he appears to have counseled against rebellion. It was upon learning of the murder of Sotelo that he changed his mind. Franco was a junior partner at the start of the war, but the subsequent deaths of the rebellion’s senior organizers allowed him to take full command.

There was no coup d’etat. The rebels knew that the political elites and most of the military’s active commanders would remain loyal to the republic. What they hoped for was a revolt of the captains. They bet on a general military insurrection taking place across the entire country that would take the capital within a month. But they lost this bet. By the end of the first week, all major cities were solidly in Republican—that is, leftist—hands. Most of the navy and air force, as well as half the army, remained with the republic. The Republicans controlled the arms and munitions deposits, the major industrial areas, and all of Spain’s gold reserves.

But instead of using existing security forces to restore stability, the Republican government armed popular militias. This unleashed an orgy of violence and destruction—mass murders of nuns and priests and others became the order of the day across the nearly two thirds of Spain that the Republicans controlled. These horrors swung the sympathies of Catholics and the middle class toward the rebels, giving them a wide base of support. The rebellion was saved.

Franco’s counterrevolutionary forces consisted of Catholics, royalists, Falange fascists, anti-socialist republicans, and pretorians desiring a stable military dictatorship. From 1936 to 1939, Franco cautiously but skillfully maneuvered this coalition to defeat the Republicans and take over Spain. It is customary to describe Franco’s counterrevolution as “fascist,” but Franco’s motley coalition refutes this. Falange fascists and the royalist Right, for example, had diametrically opposed goals. The royalists rejected democracy and desired restoration of a Christian monarch—or at least a ruler concerned with protecting traditional Christian society. This was abhorrent to fascists, who wanted to create a revolutionary mass movement and unite it with the state through a post-Christian, pagan civic religion. Franco was skilled at playing both factions against each other, but for political and personal reasons he favored the traditionals. He understood that the Republicans’ repeated attacks on Catholics had turned the Spanish Civil War into a religious war and people supported him because he was defending the Catholic Church. Consequently, the Nationalist counterrevolution had the goal of traditionalist restoration, not anti-clerical revolution.

In The Franco Regime, 1936–1975 (1987), Payne describes the consolidation of Franco’s neo-traditionalist regime. Generally, Spaniards acquiesced to Franco’s rule. Though deprived of many public liberties during the civil war and afterward, they retained their private liberties. They feared losing those, too, if conflict were to resume and the other side were to gain the upper hand. Julián Marías, whom Payne calls “arguably the wisest and most balanced Spanish intellectual” of the period, writes: the majority were persuaded that if that outcome had been the reverse, the sphere of liberty would not have been greater because both belligerents had promised the destruction of the other.... Thus it was not easy to mobilize Spaniards toward an inversion of the outcome of the war, and since that basically was what the most politicized fragments of the country were proposing, the majority remained relatively indifferent. It can be said that a large number of Spaniards waited without haste for the end of the regime. [Emphasis in the original.]

Through a combination of social corporatism and technocratic governance, the regime brought about a religious revival and material prosperity. But in the long run, Payne believes, the regime’s economic success undermined its distinct neo-traditionalism. Economic growth brought to Spain the materialist, libertine culture that was expanding elsewhere in western Europe. Even before the “caudillo” died in 1975, Francoist society and culture were largely gone.

Lessons for the Present

A s Stanley Payne’s life work shows, the fall of the Second Spanish Republic and Spain’s ensuing civil war repay careful study. It demonstrates the characteristics of a socialist rather than a Bolshevik revolution. It shows the failure of centrists and rightists to understand the socialist strategy of exploiting rather than opposing legality, and of redefining political norms to accord with their own agenda. The republic’s fall also highlights the liberal centrist temptation to justify abuses of power and violations of norms in an attempt to save democracy—making them instead complicit in its destruction. The rise of China as a neo-traditionalist authoritarian technocracy suggests that Franco’s regime model has survived. Hence the regime merits careful study as something greater than an anachronism destined to disappear through the march of history.

Yet the most unsettling relevance of the Spanish case is its demonstration that modern liberal democracies are not immune to revolution. They can succumb to internal revolutionary processes. Liberal democracies are not guaranteed happy endings. The fall of the Spanish Republic reminds us that history remains tragic.

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