
War and Revolution in Catalonia, 1936–1939

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War and Revolution in Catalonia, 1936–1939

By

Pelai Pagès i Blanch

Translated by

Patrick L. Gallagher



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2013

This book is a translation of Pelai Pagès i Blanch, *Cataluña en guerra y en revolución: (1936–1939)*, Ediciones Espuela de Plata. © 2007 Pagès i Blanch.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pagès, Pelai.

[Guerra civil espanyola a Catalunya (1936–1939). English]

War and revolution in Catalonia, 1936–1939 / by Pelai Pages i Blanch ; translated by Patrick L. Gallagher.

pages cm

"This book is a translation of Pages i Blanch, Pelai 2007, Cataluña en guerra y en revolución. (1936–1939), Ediciones Espuela de Plata. (c) 2007"—Title page verso.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-90-04-25426-8 (hardback) — ISBN 978-90-04-25427-5 (e-book) 1. Catalonia (Spain)—History—20th century. 2. Spain—History—Civil War, 1936–1939. I. Title.

DP302.C68P3313 2013

946.7—dc23

2013024759

This publication has been typeset in the multilingual “Brill” typeface. With over 5,100 characters covering Latin, IPA, Greek, and Cyrillic, this typeface is especially suitable for use in the humanities. For more information, please see www.brill.com/brill-typeface.

ISSN 1570-1522

ISBN 978-90-04-25426-8 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-25427-5 (e-book)

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Contents

Foreword	vii
Introduction	1
1 Precursors to War and Revolution in Catalonia	5
2 The Military Uprising and the Failure of the Rebellion	20
3 Political Transformations: the Crisis of the <i>Generalitat</i> and the Formation of the Militia Committees	32
4 The Formation of the Popular Militias and the Aragon Front	44
5 Public Order and Political Repression in the Rearguard	54
6 The Republican Justice System: From Popular Tribunals to Special Tribunals	64
7 Social and Economic Transformations	76
8 The War Economy and the War Industries	84
9 Forming the Unity Government and the First Political Disagreements	93
10 The May Events of 1937	105
11 The Consequences of the May Events	117
12 The Republican Military Offensives, Summer 1937	126
13 The Negrín Government in Barcelona and the Rupture of the Catalan Front	136

14	The Battle of the Ebro and the Deterioration of Conditions in the Rearguard	149
15	The Occupation of Catalonia and Losing the War	160
	Conclusion: The Historical Significance of the Republic's Defeat	160
Appendix of Documents		
A	'The Failure of the Military Insurrection in Barcelona', <i>La Vanguardia</i> , 22 July 1936	176
B	Manuel Moragues, 'The Formation of the Catalan Central Committee of Anti-fascist Militias', <i>La Publicitat</i> , 2 August 1936 ...	183
C	'Popular Militias on the Aragon Front', <i>Crònica diària</i> , 24 July 1936	186
D	'Public Order in the Catalan Rearguard', <i>Crònica diària</i> , 24 October 1936	188
E	'The Municipalisation of Housing', <i>La Vanguardia</i> , 19 June 1937 ...	190
F	The Fatarella Incidents:	
	From the CNT's <i>Solidaridad Obrera</i> , 26 January 1937	200
	From the UGT's <i>Las noticias</i> , 28 January 1937	202
G	The May 1937 Events. From <i>Crònica diària</i> , 3, 4 and 5 May 1937 ...	204
H	'Repression Against the POUM', letter from jailed members of the POUM	207
I	Francisco Franco and Ramón Serrano Suñer, 'The Abolition of the Catalan Autonomy Statute', <i>Boletín Oficial del Estado</i> , 8 April 1938	211
J	'The Battle of the Ebro', <i>La Humanitat</i> , 30 July 1938	213
K	'Disagreements Between the <i>Generalitat</i> and the Republican Government', <i>La Vanguardia</i> , 1 October 1938	216
L	'Bidding Farewell to the International Brigades', <i>La Humanitat</i> , 29 October 1938	221
M	'The Last Armed Resistance', editorial published in the PSUC daily newspaper, <i>Treball</i> , 21 January 1939	224
N	Franco occupies Catalonia:	
	Fidel Dávila Arroyo, <i>La Vanguardia</i> , 27 January 1939	226
	Eliseo Álvarez Arenas, <i>La Vanguardia</i> , 28 January 1939	228
	Bibliography	233
	Index	239

Foreword

Despite its valuable contribution, this book by Pelai Pagès i Blanch is virtually unknown outside of Spain. Under Franco's government, the history of the Spanish Civil War was exclusively written by the victors, and so most academically rigorous studies of the Republic and the revolution were conducted by non-Iberian writers. Today, even though academic freedom is alive and well in Spain, and state-sponsored censorship has been left behind, foreign academic works are still commonly translated into Spanish, while alarmingly few works by Spanish and Catalan writers have been translated into English. Consequently, many of the best studies in the field are not accessible to non-Spanish or non-Catalan readers. My hope is that this translation will make Pagès's book – originally published in Catalan in 1987 and then greatly expanded for the Spanish edition in 2007 – accessible to many more people.

Pagès, a professor at the University of Barcelona, is a leading Catalan historian of the Civil War and the foremost biographer of Andreu Nin, a leader of the POUM (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*), the 1930s Spanish communist party opposed to the official Stalinist-controlled PCE (*Partido Comunista Español*). His book offers a dynamic and sympathetic portrait of the revolution and its aftermath as experienced in Catalonia. Many writers today, opponents of revolutionary politics, portray the revolution in Catalonia firstly as unfortunate and strategically disastrous, and secondly as an exclusively Catalan affair and therefore of little importance other than the nuisance it caused to Spain as a whole. Of those who do recognise the pivotal historical importance of the revolutionary left

in Catalonia, many have only dedicated book chapters to the Catalan events. In fact, until now, George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*¹ is the only book in English dedicated to the war and revolution in this region.

Pagès's study has a great deal in common with Orwell's work. It has always struck me as odd that Orwell's account, despite its enormous fame and international readership, illustrates a side of the war, and draws conclusions about it, that sharply contradict the most commonly held assumptions regarding the conflict. Orwell wrote about how the bourgeois press and the international communist press of the time persisted in misrepresenting and misunderstanding the war and revolution. Seventy-five years later, however, it is their accounts that dominate both popular and academic understandings of the war – not Orwell's. It would appear that the ideological motivations behind such portrayals of the war still prevail, affected only slightly by the prism of subsequent events.

Some of the most striking images in Orwell's narrative describe the contrast between two Barcelonas: the one Orwell first experienced in December 1936, while the social revolution was still visible in the streets, and the one he returned to a few months later, at the end of April 1937, when the Catalan bourgeoisie had made great advances towards retaking power from the workers. In December, Orwell had observed the red and red and black banners hanging from buildings, the disappearance of forms of speech that signalled social distinctions, the absence of the bourgeoisie from the streets of the city, and the energy of a confident working class inspired by revolutionary speeches and music. Orwell punctuated his powerful description of revolutionary Barcelona with an admission still marked by his own recent arrival and status as an outside observer: 'All this was queer and moving. There was much in it that I did not understand, in some ways I did not even like it, but I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for'.²

Orwell knew that his first impression of Barcelona in December 1936 was already months after the peak of workers' power had passed: after all, the central organ of the revolution, the Catalan Anti-fascist Militia Committee, had already disappeared by October 1936. Nonetheless, when Orwell returned in late April 1937, the changes he observed were remarkable. Instead of a city where the entire population appeared to be dressed in the blue coveralls of the worker, elegant dress had reappeared. Distinctions of rank were being reasserted in the rearguard under the guise of the new 'Popular Army'. Perhaps most tellingly, the civilian population seemed to have lost the enthusiasm of the revolution. Orwell learns that from the beginning of January 1937, as the power of the

1. Orwell 1952.

2. Orwell 1952, p. 7.

workers' organisations had declined in Catalonia, the number of volunteers for duty on the front had plummeted. In this book, Pagès tells us how and why Catalonia moved from that state of revolutionary optimism to the state observed by Orwell on his second visit. Like Orwell, the author shows the extremely high stakes involved in uniting the leftist forces to fight the fascists, as well as the consequences of reversing the progress of the revolution as a strategy to win the war. After a general introduction to the social and political circumstances that brought war and revolution to Spain and Catalonia in the 1930s, Pagès offers a detailed account of separate but overlapping processes. One begins with the revolution itself, emerging from the Catalan workers' reaction to the military rebellion. He gives a step-by-step account of everything from the street battles that stopped the military uprising in its tracks to the workers forming militias to extend their defensive efforts to other areas of Catalonia and neighbouring Aragon, collectivising the economy and housing, and building a collectivised war industry almost from scratch. The revolution created circumstances that are often referred to as 'dual power', where workers' organisations ruled in the streets and organised the defence of the revolution, while bourgeois and republican institutions continued to exist, although sometimes only in name. Pagès also addresses the most controversial aspects of this revolutionary stage: the repression of class enemies, the actions of the 'uncontrollables' and anti-clerical violence.

One of the fascinating realities of the revolution in Spain is the variety of solutions that workers and peasants adopted in order to reorganise production while they were mobilising for war. As Pagès shows, in some instances revolutionary transformations were magnificently successful. In other instances, social transformation was forced into retreat before it ever had a chance to succeed. Pagès makes sense of Catalonia's revolutionary experience, showing that revolution is an infinitely complicated and contradictory affair.

An understanding of these details greatly clarifies the process of republican counterrevolution that began to take significant steps as early as September 1936. The author describes the progressive imposition of bourgeois power over the workers and their organisations – first by the republican government in Catalonia, backed by the PSUC (Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia), and then by the Spanish republican government, backed by the Spanish Communist Party.

As Pagès points out, the need to centralise efforts to fight against the military rebellion allowed the Catalan government to gain representation on the Catalan Anti-fascist Militia Committee and begin to co-opt the revolution and regain the power they had lost to the anarchists with enormous efficiency. The anarchists' refusal to centralise power on a strictly working-class basis resulted in the creation of a 'cross-class' committee with members who, from the beginning, were attempting to increase the Catalan government's power at the expense of the Anti-fascist Militia Committee.

Throughout the book, close attention is paid to the different crises suffered by the parliamentary governments of Catalonia and, in some cases, of Spain. During the war, legislation in Catalonia was largely confined to the cabinet (*consell executiu*), or to decrees from the president, who was the first minister of the government cabinet. The author pays close attention to the ever-changing appointments and reappointments, the shuffling and re-shuffling of cabinet positions: he often includes detailed lists of the appointed ministers and their party or trade union affiliations. In most cases, these moves reflect a change in the political balance of power within the broad array of the anti-fascist forces represented in the Catalan government. These forces are often simplistically referred to as the 'republican' side, a view that this book challenges in several ways. These changes are referred to as 'governmental crises' because of the need to reconstruct the cabinet. Following the revolving door of ministerial appointments and the ministers' political affiliations is one way to see the gradual imposition of republican strategies and politics over those of the revolution.

Another process Pagès describes, played out between Spain and Catalonia, is signalled by the author's careful lexical choices. Throughout the text, both in the original and the translation, Catalonia is not referred to as a mere region within Spain. For clarity, my translation refers to Spain's government as the 'Government of the Republic' or the 'Republican Government' and to Catalonia's (republican) government as the '*Generalitat*'. Whatever one's own sympathy or antipathy towards Catalan nationalism, it is important to recognise that aspirations for Catalan autonomy and/or independence conditioned important processes in the war. These aspirations were felt – although not always in the same way or with the same vigour – among Catalan workers, the peasantry, the middle class, and even important sectors of the Catalan ruling class. They were also an important factor in the military uprising against the Spanish Republic, because the military opposed what they saw as the Spanish Republican Government's disastrous lenience towards Catalan nationalism between 1931 and 1936.

Pagès shows that, in spite of what the military believed, the politicians of the Republican Government felt little support for Catalan nationalism, and, in fact, their opposition to Catalan nationalism became much more intense during the course of the war. Like the *Generalitat* in its struggle for power *vis à vis* the workers, the Republican Government stressed that it was taking over the war effort because coordination and centralisation were needed in order to take on the enemy. Still, in its efforts to fight the military rebellion and wrest power from the workers, the *Generalitat* actually broadened its autonomy through much of the first year of war.

From the perspective of the Spanish Republican Government, Catalonia was extremely important because of its economic strength and its relative distance

from the fronts that could have threatened its industrial might. Catalonia's position relative to the fronts has been described as 'lucky', but it was, of course, the result of material conditions. Catalan industry was an important factor in the strength and maturity of the Catalan working class. In turn, the workers' high level of political organisation and their ability to mobilise had contributed substantially to the defeat of the military *coup* in Catalonia and made possible the early successes of the revolution. It is true that there were military forces loyal to the Republic in Catalonia that played an important role in defeating the *coup*, but it is inconceivable that they would have defeated Franco without the spontaneous and massive mobilisation of the Catalan working class.

In the end, the Spanish Government of Madrid, which had moved to Valencia by November 1936 and then to Barcelona itself in October 1937, was wary both of the social revolution that had placed republican rule as a whole in jeopardy, and also of the independence gained by the *Generalitat* as it recaptured more and more power for republicanism from the Catalan workers. In this book, then, we see a dual dynamic unfolding in the conflict in Catalonia: republican opposition, both Spanish and Catalan, to worker and peasant revolution, which threatened republicanism as the liberal defender of the capitalist state; and the Spanish government's opposition to Catalan autonomy. The final chapters of *War and Revolution in Catalonia* tell the tragic tale of the increasingly desperate circumstances in Catalonia from the summer of 1937 to its capture by Franco in January 1939.

Finally, another of this book's important contributions is an Appendix that collects many fascinating documents from the war. Until now, most of these documents could only be found in their original language in the Spanish or Catalan archives. Pagès introduces each of these documents – newspaper articles, correspondence, legislation and decrees.

A Few Notes on the Translation

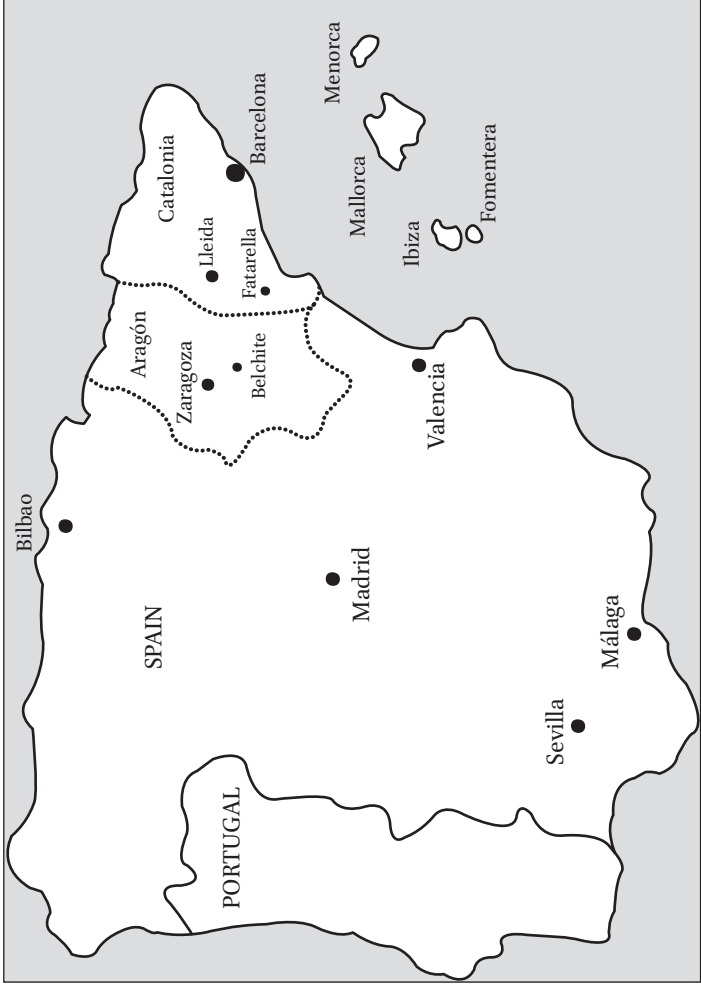
As has already been mentioned, an attempt has been made to write about Catalonia as an independent entity as much as possible. A few other lexical choices are worth noting. Pagès does not refer to the enemy of the Republic – the rebellious army that will soon be led by Francisco Franco – as the 'Nationalists', as is often the case in histories of the war. The 'Nationalist' label was devised by the insurgent army, appropriating for themselves a legitimacy that their insurrection against the Republican Government did not necessarily merit. Not surprisingly, Franco and his generals label their enemies 'criminals' or 'rebels'. While calling Franco's forces 'Nationalists' may be a convenient way of referring to those who took up arms against the Spanish Republic, this work uses various words: 'rebels', 'insurrectionists', 'insurgents', 'Francoists', 'fascists'.

Geographical locations in this book span both Catalan-speaking and Castilian-Spanish speaking areas. Catalan is the primary language of the *Generalitat* and Castilian (*Castellano*) the language of the Republican Government. Therefore, sources, place names, parties, offices, and even the names of important participants in the events can be written in Catalan, Castilian, or translated into English. Although I have sometimes followed conventions established in other English-language histories of the Civil War, in general I have left Catalan sources and place names in Catalan, Spanish sources and place names in Castilian. The Catalan city Lleida, for example, which is Lérida in Castilian and Lerida in English, is referred to as Lleida throughout the book. Offices and parties usually referred to in English are, when first mentioned, given their names in Catalan (if they are Catalan), or in Castilian (if they are Spanish). One exception to this is in quotations: if a Spanish politician is speaking about a Catalan party or place and uses the Castilian term, I have left the name in Castilian. Finally, there are a few instances where important source texts can be found in English. Where that is the case, I have provided bibliographical information so that the English-language text can be consulted.

Special Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Kent State University's Research Council for the grant that made possible the completion of this translation.

Patrick L. Gallagher
Kent State University



Introduction

In 1986, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Spanish Civil War, I was asked to write a book in Catalan about the war in Catalonia that, while maintaining methodological rigour, synthesised current research for the general public. The idea was to write a new history that would contribute to our understanding of the war in Catalan territory by bringing together new research from the monographs published in the previous two decades. In the introduction to that book, published one year later, I commented that the Spanish Civil War was still intensely debated. With the fiftieth anniversary came a multitude of conferences, expositions and debates. Ten years later, the second edition of the book was published. I again talked about how much interest there was in the Civil War, and I discussed the popular and critical success of Ken Loach's film *Land and Freedom* when it came out in 1995. Also noteworthy at the time were the new historical sources that became available to historians due to the fall of the Soviet régime. Nevertheless, the second edition made few changes to the edition published in 1987.

Now, on the occasion of the English translation of the book, itself based on the 2007 edition published in Spanish for the seventieth anniversary of the Civil War, I find myself once again remarking on the continuing relevance of the Civil War and its lasting socio-political weight. In 2007, Prime Minister Rodríguez Zapatero's government approved the Historical Memory Law, which challenges earlier attempts, during the transition period, to shut the door on the trauma of the

war in Spanish society. As a consequence, it seems that a day does not pass without the Civil War appearing in the country's newspapers for some reason or another. This is a new phenomenon in our history, and it shows that the war still casts a long shadow on both the present and the future. This is not the place to debate why the war is still an issue, but it does seem clear that, even without the enormous and growing literature on the subject, the Civil War is the most important event in contemporary Spanish history.

Something else has happened over the last few years: a collection of conservative authors has begun publishing books re-examining the Civil War and questioning its left-wing 'myths'. A few things should be mentioned about these 'revisionists'. They are not professional historians but rather ideologues of the right. Their books have failed to offer anything new: instead, they have merely reproduced what Franco's historians said about the war in their day – albeit in a more modern prose. Their access to the media explains why their books have been successful, but, with few exceptions, the debate they hoped to re-launch has had little impact on historians.

With the exception of the Second World War, the Spanish Civil War (1936–9) continues to be the event of the twentieth century with the most extensive bibliography. With all that continues to be published on the topic both inside Spain and beyond, it is difficult to keep up – even for a specialist. This interest undoubtedly reflects the immense echo the war produced at the time: its enormous international implications, its role in leading up to the second European conflagration of the century, the participation of Italy and Germany on Franco's side, the international volunteers that came to fight for the Republic, the final outcome, Franco's long dictatorship after the war, the peculiarities of the Spanish transition to democracy, and finally, the war's contemporary implications. Interest is still strong internationally: in just the last few years, for example, I have participated in conferences on the Civil War in Italy, Switzerland, and France. The Spanish Civil War might be the last 'romantic' war in history: it was certainly fought over economic and social spoils and over power in both Spain and Europe, but it was also a battle of ideals. In many respects, it was history's last ideological war.

I believe that this ideological aspect is fundamental for understanding why the war has stirred passions so deeply and why it continues to do so. As I have pointed out on other occasions, these ideological questions crystallise around the social revolution that developed in the Republican zone as a result of the outbreak of war. That is to say, without the far-reaching economic and social transformations in the first months of the war, the ideological questions would have been less significant. And without recognising the importance of the social revolution, it would be difficult to understand the political evolution of the

Republic during the war, the positions taken by international forces, and the war's outcome.

Of all the Republican zones following the outbreak of war, Catalonia experienced the most profound revolution. The strength of the workers' movement and popular organisations explains not only why Catalonia was considered the 'bastion of the Republic' beginning in 1931, but also why the popular classes saw in the profound crisis created by the war a chance to realise the social transformations to which they had dedicated themselves. Under workers' power, Catalonia achieved revolutionary change and considerable political independence, and this eventually set the stage for a conflict on the Republican side that became, within the greater war, a kind of mini-civil war among the anti-fascist camp. Due to the extent of this social revolution, some have claimed that Catalonia somehow stayed out of the war. Catalonia did experience a social revolution, but at the same time it organised a significant war effort to help defeat the military insurrection. Others, such as certain Catalan nationalists, have claimed that the war was imported to Catalonia from Spain, and that Catalonia ignored the problems and exigencies in the Spanish Republican zone that were caused by the war. All these ideas about Catalonia's role in the war will be challenged here.

One must consider countless facets of the Civil War in order to understand how it played out in Catalonia. In this book, I have attempted to look at them globally: the Catalan circumstances that led to war, the 19 July events that led to the failure of the military coup, the revolution itself, the political and religious repression, the evolution of the political conflict, the military aspects of the war, and the final defeat and its repercussions. My intention has been to consider everything that determined the history of those two-and-a-half years of war in Catalonia. I have attempted to present this history from a perspective that is both critical and self-critical, that hides no details, and that makes no concessions to the heightened emotions this history stirs. This is not a book that makes any attempt to play to the gallery.

One last thing. The 2007 edition of the book, of which this edition is a translation, has little in common with the Catalan edition of 1987. In the newer edition I not only corrected some errors in the original, but also brought it up to date and included a consideration of new work that has since appeared on the war. I have made ample use of the *Crònica diària*, a daily publication of the office of the president of Catalonia's *Generalitat*, currently located in the Tarradellas Archives of the Poblet monastery. From the same archive, I have used documentation from the War Industries Commission, and I have drawn on research from various other archives like the one in Salamanca and the National Archive of Catalonia (*Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya*). I have also made ample use of the daily press, especially *La Vanguardia*, documents from the former Comintern

archives in Moscow, and, when necessary, official sources of the Catalan government and the government of the (Spanish) Republic. The result, with all of these new sources, is practically a new book. It is based on the Catalan version, but this can hardly be recognised. The twelve chapters from the original are now fifteen, and the documental appendix has been entirely restructured. My intention has been to include aspects of the war, like the important questions of the War Industries and the Justice Tribunals, that had hardly appeared in the Catalan version of the book.

As I said in my introduction of 1986, I wrote this book in order to offer a critical approach to a period of our history that has had an enormous impact on many generations of Catalans and Spaniards, and even on the lives of thousands of international combatants. Whatever its value, I would like to dedicate this small work to these many people.

Chapter One

Precursors to War and Revolution in Catalonia

One school of Spanish historians has repeatedly argued that the outbreak of Civil War in Spain had little to do with Catalonia or its history. According to this school, Catalonia, on the eve of the military insurrection of 19 July 1936, was enjoying a political and social peace – sometimes referred to as a ‘Catalan oasis’ – that contrasted sharply with the profound tensions experienced throughout the rest of the Spanish Republic. For these historians, Spain imposed the Civil War on Catalonia, imposing it on the region against the wishes of both the left and the right.¹

At the very least, this analysis – still defended today by certain groups of Catalan nationalists – is superficial, and not just because the notion of the region being fundamentally at peace in the spring of 1936 needs careful qualification. To understand fully the war and revolution in Catalonia, we must focus not only on the few months preceding the war’s outbreak, but also on the structural causes originating further back in time. Both the Republican period between 1931 and 1936 and the tense international circumstances of the 1930s shaped the histories of Spain and Catalonia. In addition, we cannot ignore the complex relationship between Catalonia and the Spanish Republic, with their closely related, yet nonetheless distinct, histories.

1. [Translator’s Note, hereafter, TN] Throughout this study, ‘Spain’ is used to refer to the larger nation whose capital (at least at the beginning of the war) was Madrid: Catalonia has a strong history of aspiring to independence and/or political autonomy from Spain. See the Translator’s Introduction for a fuller description of this aspect of Pagès’s analysis.

The Civil War should even be understood in conjunction with Spain's other civil wars, the Carlist Wars of the nineteenth century.² Those wars were not, as is commonly thought, merely a conflict between Carlists and Liberals, with the Liberals representing progress, modernisation, and the introduction of capitalist relations, and the Carlists representing the *ancien régime* and economic, social, and political intransigence.³ A third socio-political force also played a role in the conflicts, a force that appeared early in the nineteenth century and contributed to the tensions leading to civil war in the next century: Spanish republicanism. A popular movement obviously distinct from Carlism, republicanism also distinguished itself from Spanish liberalism by supporting a social and political project that reached beyond the boundaries of liberal capitalism. In fact, Spain's original republicanism, already strong by the 1840s, had ties to the Utopian socialism that had begun to appear in Europe, and, in contrast to the liberal aim of building a strongly centralised state, it fiercely defended federalism. Also during the 1840s, the first signs of a workers' movement appeared. The movement was still weak, and it lacked solid organisation at the national level; however, its appearance in some regions, particularly in Catalonia and parts of Valencia, set in motion the historical forces that would eventually challenge the capitalist social relations that were themselves just gaining a foothold in Spain.⁴

The social and political contradictions produced by the confluence of all these forces reached their breaking point during the six years between 1868 and 1874, known by historians as the Revolutionary Sexenium, which began with the progressive bourgeoisie's 'pseudo-revolution' in September 1868. The Sexenium culminated in Spain's first experience of Republican rule from 1873–4, when – as had happened repeatedly earlier on in the century, in 1835, 1840–3 and 1854–6 – popular forces from below overwhelmed the bourgeoisie's timid political aims.⁵

2. [TN] There were three Carlist civil wars in the nineteenth century. The Carlists were Catholic conservatives who had defended the interests of the *ancien régime* in the name of Carlos Isidro. Carlos was passed over for the Spanish crown in 1833 in favour of his three-year-old niece, Isabel II, the daughter of Fernando VII.

3. There are many analyses of the Carlist Wars that offer this perspective, but we should not forget that these wars represented something more, since they also saw Spanish peasants react strongly to the negative effects of introducing capitalist relations into the agricultural sector. See the classic study of these effects by Jaime Torras (Torras 1976). See also Fradera, Millan, and Garrabou (eds.) 1990.

4. See Pagès et al. 2001.

5. The year 1835 marks the first offensive of liberalism after Isabel II inherited the throne [TN: first her mother, María Cristina, and then General Baldomero Espartero, served as Regents until 1843], resulting in the definitive establishment of liberalism in Spain. It is also the year of the first stage of the great '*bullangues*' (insurrections) in Catalonia, culminating in the burning of convents, monasteries, and the Banaplata factory. During the years of Espartero's regency (1840–3), an important popular movement in Catalonia led to the 'Jamància', an enormous popular rebellion. Finally, the two years between 1854 and 1856, known as the Progressive Biennium, was a period of popular rebellion in all

This First Republic represented a victory for the republican impulses that had so often failed before. Meanwhile, the first Workers' International was also gaining a presence throughout the Spanish state, and anarchism, recently introduced in Spain, was coalescing rapidly into a worker and peasant movement with distinct regional characteristics in places like Catalonia and Andalucía. These factors combined to undermine two of the most important objectives of nineteenth-century bourgeois hegemony: order and stability, which, along with the doctrine of private property, were the foundation on which the liberal bourgeoisie had hoped to base its new capitalist system. In the demands of social sectors marginalised by the new political system and of new social classes that had emerged with industrialisation, Spain's hegemonic classes perceived a clear threat. And so, during the Sexenium, the struggles of workers and republicans – those forces that stood to benefit most from social, economic and political change – impelled Spain's hegemonic classes to set aside their own conflicts, the very conflicts that had motivated the previous century's succession of military coups, or *pronunciamientos*.⁶

More than anything else, the restoration of the monarchy in 1874 represented this consensus between the new and the old ruling classes, joined together by a shared interest in defending their privileges. This new hegemonic class developed a Spanish form of speculative capitalism which was radically anti-industrial and fundamentally based on large agricultural interests. Until the agrarian crisis at the end of the century – and even outliving it, given that few alternatives existed for the accumulation of capital – the Spanish bourgeoisie's hunger for land remained constant, and culminated in the rise of the great landowners as the definitive class that would rule Spain. In this context, where the rise of capitalism was mediated by a ruling class that embodied the most retrograde socio-political interests, the new Liberal and Conservative parties of the Restoration period represented little more than two sides of the same coin.⁷ And even though the state showed an impulse to modernise for the first time, it was also clear that the social changes desired by popular forces would once again be postponed.

Conservative party leader Antonio Cánovas del Castillo succeeded in establishing a relatively stable political order during the final decades of the nineteenth century, and during this time the army remained quiet in its barracks. However, the new system experienced frequent crises during the Restoration.

of Spain and Catalonia, during which the first general strike was organised. The characterisation of the revolution of 1868 as a 'pseudo-revolution' comes from the classic study by Josep Fontana, 'Cambio económico y crisis política: Reflexiones sobre las causas de la revolución de 1868', in Fontana 1973.

6. [TN] See chapter 2, note 2 for a description of the Spanish *pronunciamiento*.

7. This political dynamic repeated that of the Moderates and Progressives (*moderados* and *progresistas*), earlier in the century.

The revolutionary crisis of 1917 was the most profound, but the crisis of 1898, known as ‘the disaster’, paved the way for a wave of reform-minded critics advocating ‘regeneration’. There was also the crisis of 1909, characterised by protests over forced conscription for a military adventure in Morocco and culminating in Barcelona’s Tragic Week, during which seventy-eight people died and around five hundred were injured. And there were endless labour strikes and social protests. These crises brought into relief the basic incompatibility between the ruling social sectors, who opposed any kind of change that might affect their privileges, and those sectors of Spanish society interested in modernising the state as well as effecting social and economic change. Even the Catalan bourgeoisie, which since 1898 had supported ‘regeneration’ through a conservative variety of Catalan nationalism, abandoned the pretence of reform when it saw the wolf’s ears: the massive strikes in August 1917, when the workers’ movement opted for revolutionary struggle in the face of the Catalan bourgeoisie’s calamitous failure to make reforms.⁸ The aggravation of political tensions after 1917 forced Spain’s ruling classes to resort to the military dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera in 1923. Those years had been marked by the ‘Bolshevik Triennium’ in the Southern region of Andalucía and *pistolero* in Catalonia, when Catalan bosses hired gun-toting thugs to assassinate labour leaders and to violently repress the workers’ movement, sparking retaliation from radical workers.

Much of the history of Spain’s Second Republic, proclaimed on 14 April 1931 after a prolonged crisis of the monarchy, is a history of the contradictions and antagonisms between the two incompatible social blocs that had confronted each other so fiercely during the years leading up to Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship. The situation gained even more complexity within its new conjuncture. The reform-minded republicans – Azaña, Domingo, Giner de los Ríos, and the Socialists – held a majority in government, and they managed to pass reformist legislation during the first two years of the Second Republic. But after November 1933, the reformists had to confront the conservatives under worsening circumstances: the conservatives had already attempted their first anti-republican coup, led by General Sanjurjo, in the summer of 1932; meanwhile, significant popular forces had become disillusioned with the timidity of the reforms of the first two years and had concluded that their aims could only be won by going beyond such limited measures. Most of these workers were in the anarchist-led National Workers’ Federation (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*, or CNT), the Iberian Anarchist Federation (*Federación Anarquista Ibérica*, or FAI), and the socialist-led General Workers’ Union (*Union General de Trabajadores*, or UGT), but those in the smaller communist groups were also drawing revolutionary conclusions.

8. The crisis of 1917 has been analysed in detail by Juan Antonio Lacomba in his classic book *La crisis española de 1917* (Lacomba 1970).

Immediately before the war, these conflicts coalesced around a triple stand-off: republican reformists against the reactionary right, the revolutionary left against the republican reformists, and the revolutionary left against the reactionary right. Throughout the republican years, tensions grew among these groupings, becoming even more intense when the right-wing bloc won the 1933 election and set about halting the reforms passed during the first two years. In addition, the international situation stemming from the Great Depression of the 1930s had a negative impact on the developing Republic. Beginning with the New York stock market crash in October 1929, the structural crisis of international capitalism had led to a second anti-democratic wave in Europe (the first having occurred in the 1920s, as a consequence of the First World War). Most notably, in January 1933, Hitler and the National Socialists were voted into power in Germany. In October 1934 the Spanish Federation of the Autonomous Right (*Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas*, or CEDA) was called to form a government in Madrid, and workers feared that Spain was following the example of Germany, where Hitler, once in power, had rapidly dissolved democratic institutions from within, abolishing the Weimar Republic and establishing an iron-clad fascist dictatorship.

Of course, the Spanish Civil War cannot be explained without considering what some see as its immediate antecedent: the 1934 October Revolution. This revolution was, at least initially, intended to prevent the anti-republican forces from forming a government, but it quickly took on extraordinary social dimensions. The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) proclaimed a general strike throughout the country, and the strike grew into a revolutionary movement among the miners of Asturias. After two weeks of resistance by the miners, the military suppressed the revolution, giving the Chief of Military Staff, General Francisco Franco, his first opportunity to employ repressive measures.

In Catalonia, the general strike became an insurrection led by Lluís Companys, the Catalan president. It has often been held that this insurrection was strictly political, lacking the social content of the events in Asturias. Certainly, when Companys proclaimed the new Catalan State of the Federal Republic of Spain on 6 October, his affirmation of Catalan nationalism was primarily political in nature. In addition, the CNT had abstained from the strike. However, in many Catalan cities, like Lleida (Lerida), Girona (Gerona), Palafrugell, Vilanova i la Geltrú and Granollers, the rebellion was both nationalist and social in character.⁹ This dual character is confirmed in the accounts of contemporary witnesses as ideologically removed from one another as Aymamí Baudina, of the

9. [TN] For many writing during or about the 1930s in Spain, 'social' aims or 'social' conflict refers specifically to class and to the conflicts or political contradictions that show the opposing interests of different social classes.

Catalan Left Republicans (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*); Àngel Estivill, of the Workers and Peasants' Bloc (*Bloc Obrer i Camperol*, or BOC); and both Costa i Déu and Modest Sabaté, of the conservative Catalan League (*Lliga Catalana*).¹⁰ In fact, social tensions in the Catalan provinces had recently worsened due to the contentious *Llei de Contractes de Conreu*,¹¹ which for much of 1934 had caused landowners to face off with tenant farmers (*arrendataris*). In some cases, social tensions rose even higher in the country than in the urban centres.

This description of the relations that existed in small towns, written by Costa i Déu and Modest Sabaté, the *Lliga's* journalists, essentially predicted what would happen in rural areas all across the region in July 1936: 'With regards to the towns, where the most contrasting social classes had to experience political and social tensions while in constant proximity with one another, the outbreak of a revolutionary period made the hatred and passions of the anarchists for those associated with religiosity and high social rank more acute. And it is true that when these passions are unleashed in the darkest moments of a rebellion, they unfailingly produce the greatest catastrophes, because they entail the barbarity of fights between brothers'.¹²

Certainly, this right-wing presentation of the events shows its bias: it exaggerates the malice of the revolutionaries and gives all agency to the anarchists, and when the writers claim that in the provinces 'the first victim, the victim that encompassed all the hatred, was the temple, and with the temple, the priest', they are only repeating the axiom present in nearly all the popular revolutions in Catalonia since the nineteenth century.¹³ However, the journalists' assertion that 'the events that occurred in the provinces were essentially social' was fundamentally correct.

The 1934 October Revolution was the most important and most immediate precursor to the Civil War, not only because of the events themselves but also because of their consequences. It is important, however, to reject accusations made in the last few years by right-wing 'revisionist' historians, who assign prac-

10. Aymaní i Baudina 1935; Estivill 1935; Costa i Déu and Modest Sabaté 1935 and 1936.

11. [TN] *Llei de Contractes de Conreu* (The Cultivation Contracts Law) is an example of a Republican reform that infuriated Catalan landowners. The law provided some security for tenant farmers as well as an avenue for peasants to gain ownership of any land they had worked for eighteen years.

12. Costa i Déu and Modest Sabaté 1936, pp. 15–16.

13. Unlike other areas of Spain during the Second Republic, Catalonia did not experience violent popular protests against the Church until October 1934. Of course, historically, the first demonstration of popular anti-clericalism took place in July 1835, when several monasteries were burned. The immediate antecedent of the anti-clericalist demonstrations during the Second Republic and then, in particular, at the outbreak of the Civil War, was the events of Tragic Week of 1909, when monasteries, churches, and other religious structures were set on fire.

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