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War and Revolution: Hopes of Evacuation

1. *The fruits of hatred*

The tragic events that gripped Spain during the civil war years of 1936 to 1939 can hardly be comprehended without at least some understanding of their political framework. Although the response of the founder of Opus Dei stands out in this context, to ignore the historical facts would render unintelligible what he did and why he did it. This is still more obvious when one considers that religion was a key factor in the tragedy. There has been no dearth of civil wars in Spain, but the war that broke out in 1936 was distinctive in that it unleashed one of the fiercest and bloodiest religious persecutions in twenty centuries of Christianity.[1] In the brief space of a few months, a dozen bishops and more than six thousand priests and religious were killed. This simple fact, stark and objective, sheds a somber light upon the scene, so that the founder's behavior could hardly be understood apart from it, or without a grasp of the Christian motives that led him to forgive those guilty with his whole heart, to make reparation to our Lord for the crimes committed, and to learn, for the future, the lesson of history.

In July 1936, both in the countryside and in the cities, there was an enormous tension arising from social demands, the breakdown of the national economy, the discrediting of government action, and frustrated regional sentiments. It was exacerbated by continual strikes,

[1] "The terror in Spain was similar to that of the civil war in Russia in that in both cases the clergy were among the principal victims of the violence. The persecution of the Catholic Church was the greatest ever seen in Western Europe, even counting the harshest periods of the French Revolution. The number of churchmen assassinated, some seven thousand, was proportionately equal to the number killed by the Communists in Russia, taking into account the difference of population, but it seems that torture was more common in Russia." Stanley G. Payne, *El catolicismo español* (Barcelona, 1984), p. 214. See Fernando de Meer Lecha-Marzo, "Algunos aspectos de la cuestión religiosa en la Guerra Civil (1936–1939)," in *Anales de Historia Contemporánea*, no. 7 (1988–1989), pp. 111–25.

hunger, disorder, and revolutionary agitation that incited the alienated workers and unemployed while fostering a counterrevolutionary stance on the part of people who wanted to use force. The regime was reeling on the verge of collapse, while the military was preparing a coup d'état to restore the lost authority of the Republic. How could things have come to such a pass?[2]

It is unnecessary either to go back to past centuries (to the civil wars of the nineteenth century, to the historic delay in establishing democratic principles in political institutions) or to attribute the seriousness of the conflict to the bellicose character of Spaniards.[3] When the monarchy fell and the Republic was established in 1931, half of Spain greeted its coming with rejoicing and hope. Here was a fresh start—an opportunity to rectify mistakes and establish a democratic, just, and representative government. But, from the setting up of a provisional government to the elaborating of the new Constitution, those in power and the delegates in the Constituent Assembly stamped the new government with a frequently radical style that many Spaniards found hard to accept.[4]

From its inception in 1931 to the start of the civil war in 1936, the history of the Second Spanish Republic is extremely troubled. It is easy to distinguish different stages: an initial period of getting orga-

[2] For a summary view of the situation, see Carlos Seco Serrano, "De la democracia republicana a la guerra civil," in *Historia General de España y América*, vol. 17, *La Segunda República y la guerra* (Madrid, 1988), pp. xiii–lx; and Payne, "La quiebra de la Segunda República," in *La Guerra Civil Española (Sesenta años después)*, ed. Miguel Alonso Baquer (Madrid, 1999), pp. 17–32.

[3] The Constitution of 1876 and the Electoral Law of 1890 did indeed establish democratic principles in Spain. The question was whether those principles were really effective in a country that in 1900 had an illiteracy rate of more than 60 percent.

[4] This was an era that is still controversial among historians. "The political history of the Second Spanish Republic is among the most controversial and myth-ridden in Europe in the twentieth century. The Republic began peacefully, with relatively broad acceptance, although naturally there were different attitudes among the diverse elements of Spanish society. In two years it introduced a series of reforms—some of questionable prudence and effectiveness—which produced the greatest political mobilizations Spain had seen up to that time. The result, after three years, was the most notable case of political decline and polarization in Europe in the twentieth century, disintegrating into a massive civil war, both revolutionary and counterrevolutionary.

"Even historians are not in agreement on how this occurred. They no longer accept the propaganda widely accepted abroad during the civil war and the Second World War, which attributed it to a rightist conspiracy against democracy, but there is no clear and simple consensus. The republican experience can be seen as the conflict and collapse of parliamentary forces, as the failure of an attempt at reform, or as a revolutionary process and the breeding ground of a rightist conspiracy. In fact it was all of these things, and more." Payne, *El régimen de Franco, 1936–1975* (Madrid, 1987), pp. 47–48.

nized, followed by a two-year period of radical reforms pertaining to the Church, the army, education, regional concerns, agriculture, and labor.[5] The general discontent generated by the government's actions gave rise to a poorly organized military uprising, by a small group of monarchists, which collapsed in Seville in the summer of 1932. It was neither the first, nor an isolated, attempt to change the course of events by force. Spanish political life, which already had a radical tinge, was becoming more and more violent. General elections were held in November 1933, and the Chamber of Deputies changed color politically. The previous majority, dominated by socialists and leftist republicans, was replaced by another formed by the CEDA (Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Rights) and the Radical, Liberal-Democratic, and Agrarian parties.[6] The representatives of the CEDA, the most numerous party in the new majority, taking a stance of indifference toward the form of government (monarchy or republic), proclaimed themselves conservatives and defenders of Catholic ideals. Policies designed to modify the extremism of the preceding period marked the years 1934 and 1935, along with another attempt—more intense, better prepared, and more widespread than that of 1932—to overthrow the government. This leftist uprising of 1934 collapsed in Madrid and Catalonia but succeeded in Asturias after a bloody revolution.[7] The use of the army was required to put it down and to restore constitutional government.[8]

[5] See Payne, "Antecedentes y crisis de la democracia," in *La Guerra Civil: Una nueva visión del conflicto que dividió España*, ed. Stanley G. Payne and Javier Tusell (Madrid, 1996), pp. 26–27.

[6] Out of a total of 472 delegates, the CEDA had 115, followed by the Radicales of Lerroux, with 102. The group of small right-wing parties (Agrarios, Tradicionalistas, Partido Nacionalista Vasco, Partido Nacionalista Español, and Lliga Catalana, etc.) obtained 124 seats; the small right-republican parties (Conservador, Liberal-Demócrata, and Progresista) gained a total of 30; and the leftist block, composed of various bourgeois parties (Acción Republicana, Esquema Republicana, Federales, and ORGA) and the revolutionary parties (PSOE, Radical-Socialista, Comunista, and Unió Socialista de Catalunya) got 101.

[7] Gonzalo Redondo, on p. 412 of *Historia de la Iglesia en España, 1931–1939*, vol. 1, *La Segunda República, 1931–1936* (Madrid, 1993), gives the following figures for the casualties of this uprising: "Deaths: gendarmery, 100; Army, 98; police force and cavalry, 86; priests and religious, 34; peasants, 1,051. Wounded: Army and police, 900; peasants, 2,051. Buildings burned, blown up, or damaged: public buildings (barracks, city halls, etc.), 63; churches, 58; cultural centers, 5; factories, 26; private homes, 730. In addition, 58 bridges; 31 highways; and 66 rail lines cut."

[8] The most serious development politically was the advance of a decidedly revolutionary orientation among a sector of the socialists which had decided to bolshevize the party, in opposition to its moderate wing. See Burnet Bolloten, *La Guerra Civil española: Revolución y contrarrevolución* (Madrid, 1989), pp. 73–89.