

Supplement to:

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Online Annex I: The Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War, which lasted from July 1936 to April 1939, was the culmination of escalating social and political tensions within the fragmented political landscape of the Second Spanish Republic, established in 1931. These tensions arose between a conservative bloc—comprising landowners, segments of the military, the principal conservative party (Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Right-wing Groups, CEDA), monarchists, the Falangist party (a group with a fascist ideological orientation), and the Church—and a left-wing bloc consisting of socialists, communists, and anarchist political groups.

The polarization between these opposing forces eventually led to a military uprising on July 17th, 1936. Led by a group of generals, including Francisco Franco (1892-1975), the coup aimed to overthrow the Republican government and establish a conservative, authoritarian regime. However, the plan did not unfold as intended. Instead of a swift takeover, the uprising triggered a civil war, dividing the country into two warring factions. The right-wing Nationalists, representing the conservative bloc, received support by foreign powers such as Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, while the Republicans, aligned with the left-wing bloc, were aided by the Soviet Union and the international brigades of volunteers (Preston, 2006; Payne, 2012).

Targeted violence against civilians

The War inflicted immense suffering (Santos & Casanova, 1999), but violence against civilians was selective rather than indiscriminate, with significant regional and temporal differences since more than half of the victims behind the lines were killed during the first

four months of the war (Ledesma & Leira-Castiñeira, 2025)¹. Beyond battlefield casualties, the war saw targeted confrontations, including urban battles and mass executions, with atrocities committed by both sides. Violence primarily targeted political opponents, ideological adversaries, and members of the clergy or landowning classes, based on their political or union affiliations, professions, or social status (Preston 2006; Aguilar et al., 2025). Both Nationalist and Republican forces focused reprisals on perceived threats, avoiding widespread violence against the general population. The clergy was the only social group targeted for complete repression, though without any intent to eradicate Catholics as a whole (Payne, 2012).

In Republican-held areas, violence targeted the clergy, landowners, supporters of right-wing parties, and suspected Nationalist advocates, driven by revolutionary fervor among anarchists, communists, and socialists. These acts were often carried out by local militias or revolutionary committees rather than centralized authorities. In contrast, Nationalist violence was more systematically organized and state-directed, targeting leftist politicians, trade unionists, and Republican sympathizers under the military's control, using regular troops, the Civil Guard, and civilian militias. In both zones, violence was strategically aimed at consolidating power and eliminating perceived threats.

Mass executions began immediately after the war's outbreak, peaking in August and September 1936 and continuing into autumn. Initially more decentralized and autonomous, Republican violence was later moderated through "people's courts"

¹ Provinces placed at the top of the killings fell into the hands of the rebels during the first months of the war—Málaga marking the turning point. Provinces conquered by the Nationalists forces in the last months of the war are at the bottom of the ranking, including the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Madrid (Ledesma & Leira-Castiñeira, 2025).

(*tribunales populares*), established in late August to regulate repression. Franco implemented similar reforms two months later, expanding military tribunals to formalize and control violence. While political killings persisted throughout the war, their frequency declined significantly in its later years (Payne, 2012).

While the demographic shock of the period was severe, it remains quantifiable. Ortega and Silvestre (2006) estimate that total excess mortality—covering combat, repression, and indirect causes for those over the age of one—reached approximately 346,000 during the three years of active conflict. This figure expands to 540,000 when including deaths from the widespread malnutrition that characterized the post-war period of 1940–1942. However, as Ledesma and Leira-Castiñeira (2025) argue, this mortality exhibited a distinct gender asymmetry rather than reflecting indiscriminate destruction. Excess deaths were heavily skewed toward men, who comprised roughly three out of every four casualties (Ortega & Silvestre, 2006)—a proportion of male excess mortality notably higher than that observed in France or Italy during World War II. In contrast, adult women experienced no statistically significant excess mortality during the conflict years. This divergence indicates that violence was largely driven by military mobilization and targeted political purges rather than being indiscriminate attacks on the broader civilian population.

Bombings and destruction of infrastructure

When compared to other 20th-century conflicts, such as Second World War or the Russian Civil War, the Spanish Civil War stands out as a relatively low-intensity conflict (Payne, 2012:183, 234). The war was fought primarily with outdated weaponry and lacked the large-scale destruction seen in later global conflicts. For instance, Second World War involved the total mobilization of resources and the obliteration of cities like Dresden,

Hiroshima, and Stalingrad, resulting in widespread devastation to infrastructure and civilian life. Similarly, the Balkan Wars of the 1990s saw extensive ethnic cleansing, mass displacement, and the near-collapse of civil society in affected regions.

In contrast, bombings during the Spanish Civil War were limited in scope. Although air raids on cities such as Durango, Guernica, Madrid, and Barcelona were traumatic for those affected, their scale was modest. A “large” air raid in this conflict might result in a hundred casualties, a stark contrast to the thousands killed in single bombing campaigns during World War II (Payne, 2012:236). Even the most damaged towns, such as Durango and Guernica, were targeted due to their proximity to battlefronts rather than for strategic purposes, as industrial centers like Bilbao suffered little damage.

Both sides conducted air and naval bombings during the war. The Republicans launched small-scale bombardments on Nationalist cities, which caused limited damage. Nationalist bombing campaigns after the Vizcaya attacks primarily targeted eastern ports, focusing on port facilities and supply lines rather than urban centers. The infamous bombing of Guernica, along with other Nationalist air raids, prompted the Republican government in 1938 to request an investigation by the League of Nations. However, the resulting report concluded that the limited number of planes involved and the focus on specific targets, such as bridges and railway stations, did not indicate a deliberate strategy of targeting civilians (Preston, 2006; Payne, 2012).

Because Spanish cities were not subjected to extensive bombardment, much of the country’s productive and civil infrastructure was preserved (Catalan, 1995; Carreras & Tafunell, 2004). Spain experienced significantly fewer physical capital losses compared to other European countries involved in Second World War. The destruction of capital goods and transportation infrastructure, including railcars, locomotives, and merchant

fleets, was considerably less severe in Spain than in France, Greece, or Italy (Catalan, 1995). Similarly, the decline in electricity production was far less pronounced in Spain than in these other European nations during the war.

The greatest damages during the War were concentrated in transportation infrastructure, while factory equipment and industrial facilities suffered minimal losses. Data on housing destruction indicates that damage to buildings was relatively limited. Losses of industrial equipment were moderate, and in many cases, industrial and economic activity continued, with some sectors in Nationalist-controlled areas even experiencing growth. In these regions, industrial production generally followed a normal trajectory, while key industrial hubs in Republican-controlled areas were largely unaffected by systematic military attacks and bombings due to their distance from the frontlines (Catalan, 1995; Payne, 2012).

Schools

The school year commenced as scheduled in both zones. Many schools continued to function when September 1936 arrived, with education proceeding relatively normally despite the difficult circumstances imposed by the war (Sierra, 2009). However, some schools were compelled to close, such as those in the Basque region, where classes were suspended in March 1937. Schools situated far from the battlefronts were able to operate with relative normalcy. In less secure areas, children were relocated, and many schools were replaced by educational programs conducted in children's colonies established in safer zones away from the conflict. To safeguard students during air raids, shelters were constructed in school basements. Additionally, numerous private educators adapted to wartime conditions by establishing makeshift schools or offering in-home lessons, especially for children from wealthy families.

In sum, while the Spanish Civil War inflicted immense suffering, the violence was not indiscriminate, nor did it entirely disrupt civilian life. Civil and educational infrastructure and essential services continued to function in many regions. This selective nature of violence and the relative preservation of civil life underscore the complexity of war, where political and ideological repression coexisted with sustained efforts to maintain educational continuity and a degree of normalcy in daily life.

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