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QUE TU FAMILIA NO VIVA EL DRAMA DE LA GUERRA

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# The Second World War's brutal prelude

Scott Hargreaves reviews

## *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939*

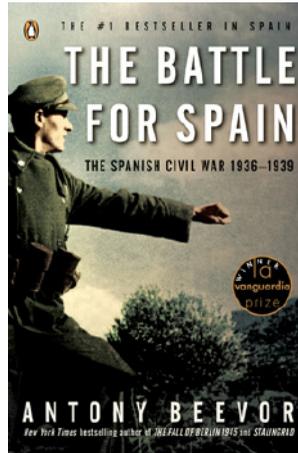
by Antony Beevor  
(Weidenfeld & Nicolson,  
2006, 584 pages)

The formal date for the beginning of the Spanish Civil War is the army's attempted coup of 17 July 1936, but many would say that the catalyst was the assassination of the leader of the (right) Parliamentary Opposition, José Calvo Sotelo, five days earlier.

But if that's the chain of events, surely the assassination of the prominent Socialist, José Castillo—for which Calvo Sotelo was swift revenge—was what set the ball rolling?

More likely, according to historian Anthony Beevor, the point of no return was reached even earlier, in 1934, with the attempted 'rising' against the (then) conservative government. After that, the fear of being attacked and persecuted by the other side could only increase, and that fear drove thoughts of pre-emption and the need for a pitiless social cleansing (the *limpieza* in the parlance of the right).

Anthony Beevor, who delivered the IPA's 2007 CD Kemp Lecture, handles these conundrums of causality diligently and deftly. He outlines the major political machinations and the progress of the military campaigns, but does not rest there. In each case he pushes to under-



stand the forces behind events, such as the political machinations behind many of the military defeats suffered by the republican forces.

By 1937, the Moscow-aligned Communists had effective control of the army and were determined to launch repeated assaults, to prove their 'anti-fascist' credentials and gain further political power inside Spain. This led to the selection of targets with no military value, utilising bloody frontal assaults, with the inevitable reverses made worse by a refusal to countenance tactical retreats.

Defeats were blamed on the sabotage of supposed 'fascist spies' or phantom Trotskyites who would duly be identified by NKVD agents and shot, destroying morale and exacerbating paranoia. The International Brigades of 'anti-fascist' volunteers were not spared this treatment and the recruitment of further such troops ground to a halt.

Before the partly-successful army coup and subsequent civil war, Spain had had five years of republican democracy since the departure of the last in a series of ineffectual and unpopular monarchs. Since 1931, the left had come in and gone out, and then a Popular Front won the 1936 poll. At each turn, the stakes

had become higher, the left resentful of the dismantling of what reforms they had managed to put in place, and the right fearful of Socialist leader Largo Caballero's over-the-top promises of a forthcoming 'revolution', with all the implications of a Leninist bloodbath carried by that word.

Despite the supposed dominance of 'fascists' and 'communists' there was an astonishing proliferation of political groups on both sides. Before the coup, the only formally fascist organisation, the Falange, probably had no more than 30,000 members and had to compete for attention on the right with the ultramontane 'Carlists', the mainstream Catholic party (CEDA), conservative republicans, (somewhat) liberal monarchists and even a so-called 'radical' party, which had supplied the Prime Minister in the right-wing government.

On the left, the mainstream liberals were swamped by descendants from all branches of the family tree of radicalism. Proudhonite socialists (PSOE) carried on the ideological debate against the Marxists, while the latter had bifurcated into the Moscow-aligned PCE versus the independent (and not formally Trotskyite) POUM.

Perhaps most appealing to the romantic imagination were the anarchists, who traced their origins to Marx's old antagonist, Mikhail Bakunin, and who, through their affiliated trade union and massive membership, wielded real power.

Once in firm control, Generalissimo Franco amalgamated by fiat the major political organisations of the right, with Falangist and Carlist units operating within the regular army chain of command. By contrast, the Moscow-aligned forces and the anarchists fought both political and sometimes actual battles with each other throughout the war. The Stalinists controlled the main republican

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forces and couched their efforts to bring the anarchist and POUM fighters under a centralised military command in terms of military necessity, but their clear political objective was to destroy the other parties of the left as independent political entities.

Both left and right also had to cope with the regional aspirations of the Basques and the Catalans, but in managing the various tensions the right was ultimately more successful. Beevor says:

The Spanish Civil war has so often been portrayed as a clash between left and right, but this is a misleading simplification. Two other axes of conflict emerged: state centralism against regional independence and authoritarianism against the freedom of the individual. The nationalist forces of the right were much more coherent because, with only minor exceptions, they combined three cohesive extremes. They were right wing, centralist and authoritarian at the same time.

Beevor's account of the many factions and personalities, particularly in the early parts of the book, can be hard going. Unlike the accounts of WWII, few of the key personages, cities, and battles are familiar and repeated reference to the (excellent) maps is required. Wikipedia is also an invaluable aid to readers.

Also hard going is the unrelenting brutality described by Beevor. Orwell pointed out that, in the polarised politics of the time, atrocity stories were believed or disbelieved according to ideological allegiances, but in truth both sides were capable of unrelenting viciousness.

The carpet-bombing of the Basque spiritual home at Guernica by the German Condor Legion was made famous by Picasso, but the true horror lies in countrymen engaging in highly personal slaughters of their supposed class enemies.

In the province of Badajoz, for example, estimates of the nationalist (Francoist) killings range from 6,000 to 12,000, and this was *after* the main battle. Within the Republican zone—the areas which had stayed loyal to the Popular Front Government, including Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and the Basque country—the killings were driven more by local action than direction from the centre, but Beevor nevertheless puts the figure for victims of the Red Terror at 38,000.

Part of the explanation for the viciousness lies in the economic backwardness of Spanish society and the social distance this created between landless peasants and urban workers on the one hand, and the landowners, church, and army on the other. In the nineteenth century, while the rest of Europe was moving forward, the Spanish aristocracy and the army were stuck in a reverie for the glory days of Ferdinand and Isabella.

The Church functioned as an arm of the repressive State, providing it with its symbolic legitimacy, drawing upon it for funds to support a bloated priesthood, and acting as its eyes and ears in the villages.

The role of the Church partly explains (but does not excuse) the often bloody anti-clericalism of the left in Spain, in contrast to Ireland or Poland where the priests were allies against the oppressor. At the outbreak of the War, there were widespread massacres of priests and nuns, and the Church aligned (even more) firmly behind the Nationalists. Mussolini's provision of assistance to Franco (up to 60,000 troops) increased his political support from conservative Catholics at home.

Beevor, also the author of *Stalingrad* and *Berlin: The Downfall*, explains how the major powers reacted to the Spanish Civil War. A League of Nations 'non-intervention committee' became a shield behind which Soviet, Italian and German

activity increased. Only Britain, France and the US took it seriously, starving the republican forces of arms and equipment and driving them into further dependence on the Soviets.

It was at the time the golden age of appeasement, and British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden believed he could avoid conflict with Germany and perhaps keep Spain out of the axis camp. Beevor claims, controversially, that a disgusted Stalin realised that he could not count on Britain in any resistance to the Nazis, and therefore moved towards the Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler of August 1939 (only four months after their forces had been fighting each other in Spain).

The left mythology of the war holds that, with British and French support, Spain could have become the first and decisive response to fascism, but even as the tide turned after Munich, those countries could not have diverted resources from their own belated defence preparations. In a bizarre coda, Franco told Hitler in 1940 that he was willing to join the axis forces, but his demands for cash and *matériel* were so outrageous that a frustrated Führer passed on the offer. After 1945, an ever-duplicious Franco would conveniently forget this, trumpeting his 'neutrality' in WWII and courting the US as the Cold War gathered pace.

One of the many tragedies of the war is that it brought forward a repressive Fascist regime, an outcome impossible if ordinary politics had continued. Unfortunately, ordinary politics could not be managed in a splintered and immature polity, and the centre did not hold.

While typically seen through the prism of ideology and of the wider conflagration that followed, this was a war with local roots, as captured brilliantly in this definitive account.

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