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978-1-107-02873-9 - The Republican Army in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939

Michael Alpert

Excerpt

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## 1 The Spanish Army in 1936

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The two armies of the Spanish Civil War of 1936–9 were essentially Spanish, though the one commanded by General Franco, known at the time as ‘Nationalist’,<sup>1</sup> included significant Italian infantry forces, while the Republican, ‘Red’ (an adjective used by both sides), ‘Popular’ or ‘People’s’ Army contained brigades of international volunteers. Despite the presence on Franco’s side of battalions recruited by the Spanish *Falange* or Fascist Party, and the institution of political commissars in the Republican Army, both armies were based on traditional Spanish models, and were offshoots of the existing pre-war Army. Before examining the formation and characteristics of the Republican Army, then, some description of the pre-war Army is required.<sup>2</sup>

The establishment of the pre-war Army was 101,455 men on the Peninsula, the Canary Islands and the Balearics, together with 30,383 in the Spanish zone of the Moroccan Protectorate. Most were conscripts. Since 1930, compulsory service had effectively lasted for one year. Taking into consideration deserters and exemptions, plus the so-called *cuotas*, such as university students, who served a shorter period, as well as the medically unfit, the actual number of conscripts was considerably smaller than the establishment. At the outset of the Civil War, then, most of the troops in barracks, including a significant

<sup>1</sup> The adjective ‘Nationalist’, used commonly for Franco’s army in English-language sources during the Civil War, is better avoided, because in Spain it evokes regional and separatist concepts to which the victors in the Spanish Civil War were hostile. ‘Insurgent’ is probably more appropriate.

<sup>2</sup> Among other works, the following are enlightening: M. Aguilar, *El ejército español durante la Segunda República*, Madrid, 1986; M. Alpert, *La reforma militar de Azaña*, 2nd edn, Granada, 2008; Carolyn Boyd, *Praetorian Politics in Liberal Spain*, Chapel Hill, NC, 1979; G. Cardona, *El poder militar en la España contemporánea hasta la guerra civil*, Madrid, 1983; S. Payne, *Politics and the Military in Modern Spain*, Stanford, CA, 1967, rev. as *Ejército y sociedad en la España liberal*, Madrid, 1977; R. Salas Larrazábal, *Historia del Ejército Popular de la República*, Madrid, 1973; C. Seco Serrano, *Militarismo y civilismo en la España contemporánea*, Madrid, 1984.

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## 2 The Spanish Army in 1936

number of those in Morocco, were young men completing their term of compulsory service, who had very little training in military skills.

Despite the reforms of the Second Republic, which had come into power in April 1931, military equipment and training were deficient. The technical level was low given that many of those recruits who came from the educated classes of society or had qualifications served no more than a short period, leaving, as had always been the case, working-class conscripts, often illiterate, to constitute the majority.

With the final pacification in 1927 of the Spanish zone of Morocco, which had cost large loss of life and huge amounts of money ever since the process had begun in 1909, and given the lack of funds for realistic and extensive manoeuvres, the Army had not had war experience. However, the *Tercio de Extranjeros*, or Foreign Legion (though it was mostly Spanish in composition), an elite force of volunteers, and the native Moroccan regiments – known as *Regulares* – benefited from more intensive training. These units would double and treble in size during the Civil War and would form the nucleus of the Franco's Insurgents against the Republic.

The Army also lacked modern equipment. While the artillery had some relatively modern pieces, in general its material was antiquated and heterogeneous. In general, the Spanish Army was not in sympathy with modernising ideas current in Europe between the two World Wars. Although artillery and engineer officers were undoubtedly highly trained, military technology was in general backward. In any case, resources were lacking to motorise or mechanise the army. At the beginning of the Civil War, Spain had only two small tank units equipped with outmoded machines. Spanish military writers described and commented on tank experiments carried out abroad, but their reaction was almost always hostile. Infantry methods developed in Germany to solve the problem of advancing against a deep defence line were not practised and hardly considered in Spain. In brief, with the exceptional use of troops to maintain order during strikes (for lack of a sufficiently trained and equipped public order force until the Republic created the *Guardia de Asalto*, and because the officers expected to be called on to keep order), life for officers and troops was routine and boring.

While conscripts saw their time in military service as a mere interval in their lives, for officers the Army represented their career and their personal ideals. The swollen number of officers – in 1932, the year which reflected the maximum effect of the reductions imposed by the Republic, there were 12,968 officers on the active list, not counting the 58 generals (since the latter figure includes generals of brigade, as well

as divisional commanders, the figure for generals is quite small) – echoed a certain backwardness in social vision which did not insist on early retirement for officers once they had reached the limit of their professional effectiveness. Only 26 of the 217 colonels in the main branches (infantry, cavalry, artillery and engineers) of the Army in 1936 were under 55 years old. Most of the generals were over this age and even majors of under 40 were rare. The absence in Spain of an adequate reserve officer class meant that, during the Moroccan wars, very large numbers of new second lieutenants (*alféreces*) had been commissioned annually, and were now creating severe promotion blocks. Thus the most competent and ambitious officers were frustrated by the strict seniority required for promotion, while there had been dissatisfaction with the very rapid battlefield promotions (*ascensos por mérito en campaña*) made during the Moroccan campaigns and which placed some officers high up on the seniority lists at every stage in their careers. Many people insisted that these promotions were a result of favouritism, and confused personal valour with the ability to run and lead military units.

In contrast with their colleagues in Great Britain, France or Germany, countries which either recruited their officers from an upper-class and often financially comfortable background, or which had a well-developed and universal social and educational structure, Spanish officers tended to come from a lower-middle class background, and one rarely concerned with social or intellectual matters. The military cadet was often one of many children of a minor civil servant or non-commissioned officer. Indeed, the level of recruitment of cadets with fathers in the service was very high. Nor was it rare for cadets to be admitted when very young, so that the military academy served in some ways as a secondary school and, given its discipline and the length of time spent there, a sort of military ‘seminary’, which inculcated a tendency to develop fixed attitudes.

Intervention in politics by means of coups d’état or the threat of them had been characteristic of the Spanish Army. From one aspect this might be considered as inevitable, given the chaos, civil wars and political vacuum of the nineteenth century. From another aspect the behaviour of the officers might be explained by the perceived absence in Spain of other ways of advancing in society. To some extent, the Army was a means of access to power and social status for the officer whose social background might be humble or who was himself an ex-sergeant promoted for his ability and long service into the list of officers, called the *Escala de Reserva Retribuida*, who held ranks of lieutenant, captain and sometimes higher but who were on a seniority list separate from that of their academy-trained colleagues.

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## 4 The Spanish Army in 1936

In the nineteenth century military insurrections had had liberal tendencies, but in the period since the restoration, at the end of 1874, of the Bourbon monarchy, following the abortive First Republic, newer generations of officers had reacted in a hostile manner to working-class activism, especially in its peculiarly Spanish anarchist garb, whether violent or unionised, as well as to Catalan regionalism and to the anticlericalism typical of the gamut of most intellectual, dissident or republican attitudes. Furthermore, the catastrophic military and naval defeat of Spain by the United States in 1898 polarised ideas and emotions. The officers saw themselves as suffering death, sickness and wounds, and enduring defeat and the shame, while Spain, undermined by subversive ideas and governed by weak and venal politicians, had sent an army and a navy to a war for which they were inadequately prepared. For those who saw the military question as a microcosm of the problems of Spain, the loss of Cuba and the Philippines revealed the deficiencies of the Army and the consequences of an attitude which was mired in out-of-date traditions. The army needed reform as part of a wide change which would Europeanise and modernise the country as a whole.

Attitudes steadily polarised. The Army reacted to criticisms of it in the press by forcing the passing on 20 March 1906 of the *Ley de Jurisdicciones*, which would be used for the next 25 years to gag critics of the Army with threats of court martial.

In 1916 infantry officers had created unions or *Juntas de Defensa* to defend their promotion interests in the same way that artillery and engineers officers used to swear on being commissioned that they would accept promotion only by seniority. By threats to mount coups, the *Juntas* coerced a succession of Ministers of War, who were almost always generals. Yet, contrary to what had been, perhaps ingenuously, hoped in reformist circles, the *Juntas* did not rise to demand a reforming parliament and a new regime. On the contrary, the officers used force to repress strikes in 1917 and after.

The self-interest of Army officers was to an extent satisfied by the *Ley de Bases para la Organización del Ejército* of 10 March 1918, which was introduced into the *Cortes* – the Spanish parliament – by the civilian War Minister Juan de la Cierva. The law increased the size of the Army and created more posts for officers. To tackle the excess it removed a number of officers from the active list, but it did nothing to unblock promotions or to lower ages of retirement. Other measures, such as salary increases and the near abolition of battlefield merit promotions, did nothing to reform the real problems or to answer the question of what type of army was needed, how much should be spent on it and how the necessary changes should be introduced.

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The military disaster in Morocco in August 1921 acted as a catalyst to officers' discontent. On one side, investigation into who was responsible for the catastrophe and officers' resentment about being unjustly blamed for it, added to fear of a far-reaching reform and even abandoning the Protectorate, played an important part in General Miguel Primo de Rivera's coup of 13 September 1923. On the other hand, military incompetence and corruption led to the rise of a younger group of officers who would be known as *africanistas*, which in turn led to a fresh way of waging war finally bringing about the defeat of the insurrectionary tribes of the Riff mountains. This campaign was marked by the emergence of the *africanistas* typified by Francisco Franco, who became a general of brigade at the age of 34.<sup>3</sup>

The *juntas* crystallised hostility between officers who expected to spend their careers in Peninsula garrisons, and Africanists who volunteered for active service in Morocco, where there were more opportunities to put their training and skills into practice, although they were also more likely to be killed, suffer wounds or fall ill.

Public opinion about Africanists was split. Traditionalists saw them as heroes sacrificing life and health to the glory of Spain's civilising mission. Progressives considered them rapacious, bloodthirsty mercenaries, who protected commercial interests (in the valuable iron-ore mines of the Riff) against the repressed protests of the Moroccan people, and received medals and promotions thanks to royal favour.

As for working-class organisations, antimilitarism was an essential element in the fundamental concepts of Spanish anarchism, and this would lead to many problems in the Republican Army during the 1936–9 Spanish Civil War. Socialists were opposed less to the Army in principle than in practice, because the burden of military service fell heavily on the working class. For the Left in general, Morocco was a hotbed of corruption, favouritism and self-interested cliques.<sup>4</sup> It is interesting that a leading Africanist, Colonel José Asensio Torrado, appointed commander of the Central Operations Theatre by socialist Premier Largo Caballero in September 1936, and later Under-Secretary for War, was dismissed and heavily criticised for attitudes which his detractors claimed he had absorbed in his career in Morocco.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> For an exposé of the anti-*africanista* attitude and a picture of life in Moroccan garrisons, see Antonio Cordon, *Trayectoria: recuerdos de un artillero*, Paris, 1971, and Arturo Barea's autobiographical novel, *La ruta*, Buenos Aires, 1951.

<sup>5</sup> Cordon, *Trayectoria*, 262; Juan Modesto, *Soy del Quinto Regimiento*, Paris, 1969, 52ff.; Enrique Lister, *Nuestra guerra*, Paris, 1966, 56. These three authors were leading communists in the Republican Army.

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## 6 The Spanish Army in 1936

The *Diario Oficial del Ministerio de la Guerra* of 31 January 1933 carried a list of typical Africanists, whose rapid battlefield promotions were under reconsideration by Manuel Azaña, Prime Minister and reforming Minister of War in the Second Republic. The several hundred officers on the list include men who would be among the leaders of the 1936 uprising. Franco himself, Alonso Vega, Asensio Cabanillas, García Escámez, Muñoz Grandes, Goded, Fanjul, Orgaz, Aranda, Alvarez-Arenas, Varela, Monasterio, Barrón, Delgado Serrano, Losas, Sáenz de Buruaga, Tella, Castejón, Barrera, García Valiño and Esteban-Infantes would all be generals or senior officers in the Insurgent army in 1936–9.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, in this list of Africanists who had been decorated or rapidly promoted others can be found some who would hold important posts in the forces of the Republic, among them Pozas and Llano de la Encomienda, Asensio Torrado, Otal and Villalba, Valcázar and del Rosal, together with the airmen Díaz Sandino, Camacho, Hidalgo de Cisneros and Riaño. But Sanjurjo, who had led the victorious campaign against the Riff insurgent Abd'el Krim, conspired against the Republic in 1932 and, had he not died in an air accident, would have led the Government which it was planned would follow the coup of July 1936, and Franco, who had spent almost all his career in Morocco and obtained nearly all his promotions on battlefield merit, were typical *africanistas*.<sup>7</sup>

**Primo de Rivera (1923–1930)**

The divisions in the Army over the promotion system were most evident in the hostility between the artillery and the engineer corps on one side, and the infantry on the other. The former swore, when they received their commissions, to accept promotion only by strict seniority, and thought that battlefield promotions were often unfair and due to pure luck.

The crisis came to a head during the dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera. He insisted on making abundant battlefield promotions during the Riff war, contravening the 1918 *Ley de Bases*, which allowed such promotions on a very restrictive basis. Consequently, the artillery officers declared a strike. As a result, some 2,000 of them were suspended without pay. The bitterness created by Primo de Rivera's promotions led to other protests and acts of indiscipline. The Artillery Academy at Segovia was closed and officers were punished with heavy

<sup>6</sup> Except Fanjul and Goded, who were executed by the Republic.

<sup>7</sup> On Franco see Paul Preston's impressive *Franco: A Biography*, HarperCollins, 1993.



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## The Second Republic (1931–1936)

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finer. Primo de Rivera's reorganisation of the General Staff, including the conversion of the specialised Staff Corps into a mere Service, thus attacking its elitist character, also created bitterness; but possibly the greatest anger was caused by the policy of retiring officers more or less arbitrarily, and this affected not only the specialised Corps but also a number of prestigious infantry generals.

The culmination of the reforms of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship was the reopening in 1927 of the General Military Academy. This imposition of a common course for all cadets before they began their specialised artillery or engineer studies was accepted in principle,<sup>8</sup> but it created anger in the specialised corps, particularly when General Franco was appointed Director of the Academy in 1927 and proceeded to surround himself with a teaching staff of Africanists. The powerful influence of this nursery of young officers would become evident when the proportion of officer graduates of the new Academy who joined the Insurgents was overwhelming.

This description of splits within the Army between 1917 and 1931 must be taken into account in considering the origins of the Republican Army in the Civil War. It would certainly be wrong to describe the splits among the Spanish officers' corps at the outset of the war as a clear dividing line separating the *Juntas* from their opponents, the *africanistas* from the *peninsulares*, the specialised Corps from the infantry, or the supporters of Primo de Rivera from those who conspired and rebelled against him. Nevertheless, and to a certain degree, the Republican Army inherited the attitudes of the *Juntas*. Many of those who plotted against Primo de Rivera would find themselves in commands. Several of them were artillery and engineer officers, who would command large infantry units in the Civil War, in contrast to practice in Franco's army; Hernández Saravia, Moriones and Jurado, Republican Army commanders but not infantry men, are outstanding examples. In addition, links with politicians were maintained, partly because the Republican Army was highly politicised, while Francoist military leaders rejected politics, at least overtly.

**The Second Republic (1931–1936)**

Primo de Rivera fell in January 1930, and after a period of uncertainty and municipal elections which returned Republican majorities

<sup>8</sup> General Emilio Mola, 'Director' and brain of the uprising of 18 July 1936, wrote, 'Our peculiar organisation prevents us obtaining, from the specialised officer corps, generals who are suitable to command units including all three Arms [artillery, engineers and infantry]', *Obras Completas*, Valladolid, 1940, 1026.

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in urban areas where voting was less subject to manipulation, King Alfonso XIII left the country and a Republican regime took power on 14 April 1931. From 1931 to 1933, when Minister of War and then Prime Minister, Manuel Azaña carried out a comprehensive reform of the Army, although much remained to be done when Azaña finally lost power in September 1933.<sup>9</sup>

Undoubtedly the reform created an atmosphere of resentment and intrigue, of hatred and envy, but it does not seem that the division among the officers in July 1936 had much to do with the reform of 1931–3. Whatever the hatreds that Azaña's reforms inspired among officers, no measure that Azaña took could have led anyone to fear for the very existence of the Army. Even if this had been so in 1931, when by some words taken out of their context some officers might have been justified, though mistaken, to think that Azaña intended to abolish the Army, this was impossible by the spring and summer of 1936 when the international situation was no longer one of permanent hope of peace and internationalism. Now there was a general fear of another war against Germany, led by a Hitler who was aggressive, revanchist and resolved to recreate German militarism, and against fascist Italy under a boastful and warlike Mussolini, whose fascist 'new man' had just crushed Abyssinia. While Spain would probably maintain its neutrality, as in the 1914–18 conflict, it needed to modernise its defence system.

Nevertheless, the speed with which Azaña legislated – or, rather, decreed, given that he did it with almost no parliamentary debate – his reform in 1931, together with his evident lack of tact and his scorn for the feelings and assumptions of Army officers, had the effect of creating among them not only bitterness but also disdain for left-wing Republicanism, and this would still be present in 1936 among officers for whom the feeling of belonging to 'the military family' was more important than any other social or political attitude.

### The reforms

The reductions in numbers in all officer ranks in the active list took place swiftly, since the famous decree of 25 April 1931 made a vague threat of compulsory retirement on standard terms if sufficient officers did not voluntarily and almost immediately accept the advantageous terms offered in the decree of retirement on full pay according to rank (though generally speaking without the various supplements added for particularly responsibilities or posts). The result was the immediate

<sup>9</sup> Alpert, *La reforma militar*.



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retirement of over 8,000 officers. The 190 generals in 1931 became 90 in 1932, while from 20,576 officers the lists were reduced to 12,373.

It would be difficult to analyse whether the friction and bitterness caused by this block to the careers of so many officers inclined them towards insurrection in 1936 against a Republic of which Manuel Azaña, author of the retirements decree, became President in May 1936. Nevertheless, it is worth stressing that left-wing opinion was convinced that too many officers with progressive views had accepted the retirement offer, among them several of those involved in the failed Republican uprising in Jaca in 1930. Franco himself believed that most monarchist officers had remained in the Army.<sup>10</sup> The main criticism of some authors is that the Republic did lose officers indiscriminately, given that Azaña refused to purge the Army politically. He thought that all those officers who were unhappy about serving the Republic had been granted retirement under favourable conditions. Indeed, many of the men who would hold high commands in the Republican Army during the war, for instance Antonio Cerdón, Adolfo Prada and Francisco Galán, had taken advantage of Azaña's decree to take early retirement.

The decree did not include any reduction in the ages of normal retirement. One of the consequences was that it was mostly the most senior among the generals and colonels who remained in the service, while the younger ones took early retirement. Thus officers, particularly at senior ranks, were no younger than they had been before the mass retirements. In both armies during the Civil War many generals and senior officers had to be retired because their physical condition was unsuitable for the rigours of active service. In the Republican Army, few of those generals who could have been employed did in fact have commands, and age was an important factor.

Another one of the measures taken by Azaña, relevant to the Civil War of 1936–9, was his rationalisation of the regiments, where many units which existed merely in a skeletal form were disbanded. The result was an army of fewer but more complete regiments of cavalry, infantry and engineers. It was on the basis of this consolidation that José María Gil-Robles, CEDA Minister of War in 1935, could make a start in modernising equipment and weapons.

The decrees of 14 July 1931, which fused the two seniority lists of academy-trained and ex-ranker officers, the law of 4 December 1931,

<sup>10</sup> 'The Retirement Law ... was politically biased in that it wanted to rid the army of monarchist officers ... but those who wanted to retire did so and we became the majority.' F. Franco-Salgado-Araujo, *Mis conversaciones con Franco*, Barcelona, 1972, 397.

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which established the corps of non-commissioned officers and thus by giving them status tried to attract them towards the Republic, and the Law of 12 September 1932 on recruitment and promotion within the officer corps probably had little influence in reinforcing any feeling of loyalty to the Republic when the officers and NCOs were faced with pressures and the circumstances of 18 July 1936. What is certain is that there was insufficient time for Azaña's hopes that his reforms would attract well-educated young men to a military career to bear fruit. His vision was that such recruits would be rapidly promoted and then proceed to the Military Academy, where the new law reserved 60 per cent of the places for them. As for boys who competed for direct entry, the reform required them to have completed a year of university science studies first, but the restriction on new Military Academy admissions was so extreme in 1931–6 that the measure had no significant effects. Only the closing of the General Military Academy of Zaragoza, commanded by Franco, necessary perhaps for urgent financial reasons, had the effect of politicising what was a mere technical issue. Closing the Academy would create the legend of an Azaña who was resentful and perverse, determined to destroy or 'triturate' – Azaña's somewhat unfortunate use of this verb in a speech came back over and over again to haunt him – the Army and thus leave Spain, in the words of his enemies, undefended against Bolshevism and Freemasonry, the *bêtes noires* of the Spanish Right.

The Republic's re-examination of battlefield promotions affected a number of officers who would occupy important commands in the Republican Army in the Civil War. Nevertheless, right-wing propaganda about these promotions, some of which were cancelled, helped to produce the image of a Republic which treated its gallant warriors badly while it favoured those officers who had the minister's ear, that is his military cabinet or private advisers. Certainly, the cabinet did not behave appropriately on the question of advising the minister about promotions, particularly in the important Madrid garrison.<sup>11</sup> In his diaries, Azaña refers to himself as prisoner of a camarilla. His problem was that he lacked confidence in those generals, among them Franco, whose gifts and qualities were respected by the officers in general. Azaña thought that those generals, mostly Africanists, and monarchists who had supported Primo de Rivera, could never share his view of a Republican Army which was suitable for the emergent bourgeois Republic.

<sup>11</sup> Manuel Azaña, *Obras Completas*, Mexico City, 1966–8, IV: 320. See also the tendentious work of J. Arrarás, *Historia de la Segunda República española*, Madrid, 1956, 141.