The Spanish Civil War

Questions and Analysis in History

ANDREW FORREST

THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

QUESTIONS AND ANALYSIS IN HISTORY

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To my parents with love and gratitude for their friendship and encouragement

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SERIES PREFACE

Most history textbooks now aim to provide the student with interpretation, and many also cover the historiography of a topic. Some include a selection of sources.

So far, however, there have been few attempts to combine *all* the skills needed by the history student. Interpretation is usually found within an overall narrative framework and it is often difficult to separate the two for essay purposes. Where sources are included, there is rarely any guidance as to how to answer the questions on them.

The Questions and Analysis series is therefore based on the belief that another approach should be added to those which already exist. It has two main aims.

The first is to separate narrative from interpretation so that the latter is no longer diluted by the former. Most chapters start with a background narrative section containing essential information. This material is then used in a section focusing on analysis through a specific question. The main purpose of this is to help to tighten up essay technique.

The second aim is to provide a comprehensive range of sources for each of the issues covered. The questions are of the type which appear on examination papers, and some have worked answers to demonstrate the techniques required.

The chapters may be approached in different ways. The background narratives can be read first to provide an overall perspective, followed by the analyses and then the sources. The alternative method is to work through all the components of each chapter before going on to the next.

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1

THE PRIMO DE RIVERA DICTATORSHIP AND THE FALL OF THE MONARCHY

BACKGROUND NARRATIVE

Nineteenth-century Spain was torn apart by two civil wars between rival claimants to the throne. An unstable and short-lived republic (February 1873–December 1874) gave way to a constitutional monarchy under Alfonso XII. The 1876 Constitution introduced a bicameral parliament and by 1890 universal male suffrage was established. But, if a new age of political enlightenment seemed at first to be dawning, it was not to be an age of gold: in the 'Disaster' year of 1898, the economically valuable Spanish colonies of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines were all lost to the United States.

Spain kept out of the First World War. Although neutrality brought economic prosperity, there also came inflation and internal conflict, including a general strike in 1917. In the same year, army officers, still blaming the politicians for the defeats of 1898, set up their own unions. On the far left, anarchism was growing fast. In the regions, there was serious unrest, notably Barcelona's 'Tragic Week' (1909), the 'Three Red Years' (*Trienio Bolchevique*) in Andalucía (1918–20), and guerrilla warfare in Catalonia during 1919–23 when 700 people were murdered. Worker against capitalist, Catholic against atheist, anarcho-syndicalist against conservative, regionalist against centralist, landless labourer against landowner showed divisions deepening in Spain. There were also divisions within the divisions. Captains of industry resented the hold on political power of the reactionary landowners. Landless labourers, already brutally repressed by the paramilitary Civil Guard,

hated the conservative-minded smallholders, the Catholic favourites and potential allies of the landowners. 'Regenerationists', who looked to restore the greatness of Spain, deplored the corruption of local political bosses, known as *caciques.*

Deepening this chasm of national anxiety came the news in 1921 of a gruesome military defeat in Morocco. The reputation of the army top brass was pilloried in the subsequent report on the affair, and the King's role in the campaign was investigated by parliament. The Catholic Church felt threatened when the government seemed about to grant full public freedom of conscience in what church leaders saw as a gross act of state-sponsored atheism. Landowners felt undermined by government attempts at land reform. But, according to Paul Preston in his 1993 biography of Francisco Franco, the flashpoint for General Primo de Rivera's *coup d'état* in 1923 came at Málaga. It was here, the embarkation point for Spanish Morocco, that a non-commissioned officer was murdered. When the suspect, a corporal, was pardoned by the King under political pressure, the officer corps felt doubly humiliated. The corrupt state had to be seized.

Primo de Rivera's dictatorship lasted seven years. Its politics reflected both reactionary and progressive attitudes, but eventually Rivera alienated as broad a political spectrum as had supported him in 1923. In January 1930 he withdrew from politics to exile in Paris, where he died. His successor, General Berenguer, headed a divided government. Although he restored political parties, as well as the four local administrations of Catalonia, parliament (the Cortes) was to be delayed until spring 1931. Berenguer's rule was not a smooth 'transition in reverse' to the system before Rivera's coup, but nor could it be a gradualist transition forward, given the level of support for more radical change, even a new dictatorship. The relatively free municipal elections of April 1931 were in effect a referendum on the monarchy, and they showed overwhelming support for the Republicans and Socialists. Alfonso XIII stepped down and the Second Republic was born.

ANALYSIS (1): WHAT DID THE DICTATORSHIP OF PRIMO DE RIVERA ACHIEVE?

When, in September 1923, as Captain-General of Barcelona, General Miguel Primo de Rivera issued a *pronunciamiento* overturning the Liberal government of García Prieto, he was seen by many as an almost messianic figure, leading a crusade against political corruption, social chaos and imperial humiliation. He was backed by the King, the army, the Church and a wide popular consensus. Yet, although his period of rule to January 1930 is called the *Dictadura*, his was not a dictatorship that followed rigid lines of policy. In Spanish Morocco, he moved from a policy of withdrawal to a strategy of war and consolidation. Initially he seemed keen to maintain an army promotions system based strictly on seniority, but he came to favour advancement through merit. He appeared to be sympathetic to the ambitions of moderate Catalan regionalism, but soon moved to a distinctly unsympathetic centralism. He planned for a constituent Cortes but then abandoned the idea.

Although, as Hugh Thomas has noted, Rivera's regime lacked the organized mass base and fanatical imperialism that might have labelled it fascist,[1] the 'Dictator' nevertheless dismissed the pre-existing Cortes, suspended elections and trial by jury, presided over a highly regulated education system, censored the press and forced many people, including some conservatives, into exile. On the other hand, Rivera was also in many ways a humane figure, concerned to alleviate the grinding poverty in which much of Spain's population lived. He posted military delegates to each region as 'pocket iron surgeons', to excise corruption. Sadly, their attempt to free the electorate from the hold of the *caciques* was no more than a qualified success.

The same could be said of Rivera's attempt to build a wide body of political support. Even after the end of the war in Morocco in 1926, when he felt able to 'liberalize' his regime, he never managed to persuade even the moderate Socialists to join his National Assembly. Rivera's Unión Patriótica (UP), which he hoped would give his regime a façade of public zeal, was a failure. His dynamic economic programme was open to political sabotage and susceptible to fluctuations in the world economy. Although Rivera banned the anarcho-syndicalist trade union, the CNT, and secured the cooperation of the moderate Socialist trade union, the UGT, he was never able to ensure united and consistent left-wing support. Three years later, in 1927, banned anarchists secretly re-established themselves as the small underground attack group, the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI).

In Catalonia and the Basque Country Rivera at first pursued a genuinely open-minded policy, in the hope that granting a regional assembly to Catalonia would uphold the authority of his Catalan conservative allies in the Lliga (Catalan Regionalist League). It did not, and Rivera saw no alternative but to abolish the assembly, much to the delight of his centralist supporters. As a result, the political tide in Catalonia, further strengthened by Rivera's banning of the Catalan flag, flowed instead towards the more radical anti-clerical Catalan separatism and republicanism as embodied in the Esquerra (Catalan Left Coalition). In the Basque Country, too, Rivera abandoned his original plans for a measure of regional autonomy under pressure from his military associates. However, he retained conservative Basque officials in their posts, while, as S. Payne has shown, the tariff on imported goods and state subsidies to local industry greatly assisted the economy of the Basque Country and, by extension, that of Spain.[2]

Rivera's social policies show similar contrasts. The government's policy on the publication of books in Catalan and Basque was tolerant. Basque culture flourished. The regime built 2,000 new schools and refurbished 2,000 others, and prioritized technical training. At the same time, Rivera disciplined university professors who criticized his government and, in a highly controversial move, delighted the Church by recognizing degrees awarded by Catholic universities. This infuriated the liberal intelligentsia. Less controversial were cheap housing for workers and higher maternity benefits for women. On the other hand, women were still barred from voting.

Social and economic progress was essential to national regeneration, but Rivera was limited in his options and dependent both on a healthy international economy and on internal cooperation. A worthy scheme was stillborn in 1928 when the *latifundistas* (large landowners) resisted the introduction into the countryside of compulsory wages and conditions arbitration committees (*comites paritarios*) which were already operating successfully in urban areas. Similarly, José Calvo Sotelo, Rivera's finance minister, was blocked in his attempts to use tax increases to pay for public works, and had to resort to heavy borrowing and an 'extraordinary budget' which led, in 1928, to the collapse of the peseta. Raymond Carr has criticized Rivera's Council for National Economy for being too bureaucratic,[3] but at the time it seemed a sensible means of pursuing autarky, as did high tariffs and state subsidies to industry. The policy of granting monopolies led to Spanish dependence on the USSR for oil. Nor was there any let-up in industrial unrest. In 1924 the Asturian Mineworkers' Union called a general strike; it failed, and the employers

imposed even longer working hours.

However, there were several areas of success. Apart from the successful urban arbitration committees, bold, imaginative public works schemes led for a time to near-full employment: new roads were built and old ones tarmacked; an extended railway network included the first trans-Pyrenees rail link between Spain and France; and 60–80 million pesetas per annum were allocated to hydro-electric schemes. Two international exhibitions in 1929 promoted tourism and Spain's image of national regeneration, celebrating Spanish achievement past and present: the Ibero-American Exposition in Seville and the Barcelona International Exhibition. The Catalan historian Albert Balcells has suggested that Rivera hoped, rather optimistically, that the Barcelona Exhibition would build a political bridge to regional sentiment in Catalonia.[4]

Gerald Brenan, in his pioneering work *The Spanish Labyrinth*, first published in 1943, pointed out that the upswing in the world economy assisted Spain's own development.[5] However, could Spain's prosperity last without a sustained rise in agricultural exports? Whatever happened internationally, domestic political consequences arising from Spain's economic performance were bound to follow. Historians have offered contrasting perspectives on this. Hugh Thomas, in his highly readable *The Spanish Civil War*, first published in 1961, juxtaposes people's high expectations, thanks to a new consumer culture, with the arrival of the economic slump in the late 1920s.[6] The resultant disillusionment was made even more painful given the Dictatorship's earlier impressive record of a 300 per cent increase in production and commerce. And even had there been no economic slump, Primo de Rivera had still failed to capitalize on the 'feel-good' factor to wed the people to a more lasting and up-to-date replacement for the monarchy.

Writing in the mid-1980s, an expert on the Rivera dictatorship, Shlomo Ben-Ami, drew attention to the political consequences of economic migration to towns and cities. This had been generated by the opportunities to work in public works schemes and expanding industry: in these more 'open' environments, relatively free of *caciquismo*, the migrant electorate became less deferential and more prone to support radical politics.[7] The American historian Gabriel Jackson, writing in 1959, stressed the positive legacy of the public works programme: it was a base for further modernization during the Republic (1931–6). Paul Preston, on the other hand, has drawn attention to the heavy burden bequeathed to the Republic by the Rivera dictatorship's excessive spending.[8]

Clearly, then, the economic history of 1920s Spain cannot be seen in isolation. Rivera's successes and failures need to be put into a wider historical and international perspective. His public works schemes built

on the progress of previous governments, and were in turn expanded and coordinated by the Republic. The arbitration committees were anticipated in post-1918 legislation and were successfully introduced into rural areas in 1931.

On the negative side, the war against the Riff and Jabala rebels in Spanish Morocco was a severe drain on the economy and Spain's military manpower. However, Rivera's initial plan – withdrawal – was rejected scornfully by the army, so he went instead for the military option. With French help, the Spanish defeated the rebels and forced their leader, Abd-el-Krim, to surrender in 1926. Victory in Morocco was immensely popular at home, but it did not guarantee loyal or sustained support from the army. The policy of promotion through merit, which Rivera was determined to pursue, won him support from the officers in Spain's elite Army of Africa (Africanistas), but earned him the bitter enmity of the ultra-traditionalist artillery corps, who went on strike in 1926 and were involved in a coup attempt in 1928. For a time they were even disbanded. Rivera also undermined his own chances of gaining support from the army by failing to address grievances over low wages and obsolete weapons. His inability to get the army as a whole firmly on side proved fatal. The captains-general responded unenthusiastically to his 'back me or sack me' telegram of January 1930, and the King was able to use this 'unconstitutional' manoeuvre as a pretext for forcing Rivera to resign. Even so, some key elements within the army, notably the Africanistas, were still loyal to Rivera and appalled at King Alfonso's cynical 'dropping of the pilot'. Perhaps ironically, Rivera's very achievements in modernizing the country seemed to have made the monarchy an anachronism. But it was Rivera who fell first. 'Spain, One and Great!' had been the rallying cry of Rivera's UP, but if his rule showed anything, it was that Spain could not unite around a slogan, however inspiring.

Questions

1. Was Primo de Rivera a weak dictator?
2. What did Spain gain from Primo de Rivera's dictatorship?

ANALYSIS (2): WHAT WAS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FALL OF THE MONARCHY IN 1931?

Four days after the municipal elections of April 1931, and two days after the provisional government inaugurated the Second Republic, King Alfonso