

# Spanish and chinese civil wars



Both China and Spain are salient examples of the turbulence that afflicted nations in the twentieth century who swooped from imperial to democratic regimes amidst a tide of protracted ideological struggles. Many of the causes of both civil wars stemmed from economically backward markets, pendulums of power and widespread social discontent, problems that were exacerbated by external influences and involvement. The collapse of China's Manchu dynasty and the abolition of Spain's Monarchy lead to political vacuums filled by revolutionaries and reformers with little sense of a unified China or Spain. What ensued were two vicious civil wars.... Despite these similarities, subtle differences in culture expound the very different outcomes of these civil wars...

The deep Nationalism displayed by the Chinese at the turn of the 20th Century that lead to the extensive xenophobia and formation of two conflicting revolutionary movements can be seen as a major cause in the Chinese Civil War. For centuries, the somewhat egocentric Chinese nature based in Confucian values created a precious, self-sufficient and culturally rich nation. However, this immemorial concept of superiority was brutally damaged following the Opium Wars with Britain in 1839 and 1842, questioning the unchallenged notion of Chinese supremacy. By 1890, Britain's military foothold resulted in the diplomatic creation of over fifty foreign enclaves and the establishment of 'concession' areas within major cities. China's ancient imperial political system was feeble in the face of Western governments and failed to generate valuable resistance, humiliating and degrading the Chinese people thus forming the foundations of the revolutionary movements that would lead China into Civil War. An early

example of this can be seen in the anti-‘ foreign devil’ movement of 1900, known as the Boxer Rebellion. Although proving unsuccessful, the rising revealed the incompetence of the imperial authorities and contributed to the Manchu government’s failures to recognise the discontent amongst its people. In October 1911 the insurrection came to a head, and the Manchu dynasty abdicated, the last Emperor, Pu-Yi, was banished to the Forbidden City and a new Republic was formed.

Similarly, in Spain, the push for democracy was at the centre of political instability and is consequently a cause of the Spanish Civil War. As a constitutional monarchy, Spain at the turn of the century was facing a catastrophic decline in national pride due to colonial losses in Central and South America and a dwindling economic situation. The brutal theory of Hispanidad proclaimed Spain the centre of World history and the Army saw its role move away from defending against external enemies and move towards redeeming Spain from the increasingly popular Bolsheviks, liberals and atheists that threatened the popular fascist values of Accion Espanola. This heightened political dissatisfaction resulted in the bloodless coup of 1923, in which King Alfonso XIII appointed Primo de Riviera the leader of the First Republic. Riviera’s rule was for the most part unsuccessful and reliant on heavy borrowing; he ignored the dire need for social reforms in order to combat Spain’s unemployment issues. A similar situation ensued within China where the new republican leader Sun Yatsen struggled to hold power over the reactionary and corrupting General Yuan Shikai who, despite having promise stability to China, solved few basic economic or political problems. Although these long term causes alone were insufficient to cause civil war, it

can be seen that in both Spain and China the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty and the abdication of King Alfonso XII created not solely ineffective and undemocratic republics but power vacuums amidst rampant, deep-rooted nationalism and pride.

Economically and socially backward, Spain was an agric nation. Compared to neighbouring European countries, there had been little industrial development in Spain during the 19th Century. The semi-feudal land system that dominated the South created a divisive wealth gap between affluent Landowners and deprived landless peasants. In other Northern regions the few industrially developed areas like Asturias and Catalonia had successfully developed textile and coal factories. The exploitation in rural and industrial areas led to the growth of radical political persuasions. Anarchism and socialism prospered as demands for worker control of factories flourished. Furthermore, the Republics failures to adequately tackle the damage inflicted on Spain as a result of the 1929 Wall Street Crash created a reputation that democracy and economic hardship were synonymous. Hence the result of Spain's extensive poverty was a loss of faith in the Republic and a turn by the masses towards radical politics and extremist groups.

Likewise, China's economic and social grievances were largely based in rural poverty. Despite its abundant natural resources; coal, oil and ore, ninety percent of the population were peasants. A lack of modern manufacturing resulted in a constant need for imports, high inflation and dwindling food supplies. The fragmented, de facto government that followed the death of Yuan Shikai in 1916, comprised of regional military leaders or warlords. It <https://assignbuster.com/spanish-and-chinese-civil-wars/>

was these locally powerful individuals who exploited and terrorised the country, a step away from any sense of national cohesion. To exacerbate their unpopularity the Bejiing government and warlords frequently negotiated with foreign powers over land and exports. It could be argued that the 4th May movement in 1919 as much a reaction against foreign exploitation an the unfavourable Versailles agreements as a reaction against the powerful and betraying warlords. This disunity and poverty intensified the resentment of Chinese nationalists, providing further direction and focus to revolutionary movements like the GMD and CCP, who were primarily inspired by a hatred of warlordism. It was the affronts to national pride committed by warlords and ‘ foreign devils’ that presented the Chinese people with a collective sense of injustice. So, it can be noted that in both China and Spain the economic turbulence was a key factor in the formation of reactionary political groups. Slow industrialisation in both countries created inequality and a lack of trust in their respective political systems. Author and historian Jung Chang recounts her father’s reasons for joining the communist party in *Wild Swans* as a result of, ‘ widespread fighting amongst warlords, who all levied heavy taxes combined with the effects of the Great depression’ and Mao’s policy of ‘ Chinese must not fight Chinese’ appealed to his sense of nationalism as well as offering equality and change.

In China, political instability largely sprouted from 19th Century disaffection with the imperial rule. Challenges to this authoritarian ruling can be noted in the Boxer Rebellion and then in the 1911 revolution. However, such an ancient and customary hierarchy was an intrinsic Chinese value, devotion and reverence towards authority dominated culture. This strict social

discipline and veneration of conformity might suggest that the Chinese never really sought democracy, the totalitarian regimes that followed their revolution illustrate the continuation of hereditary traditions. This forced and manufactured form of revolution then underpinned the succession of weak governments that lead China into civil war.

The rules of Yuan Shikai and Sun Yatsen, never adequately filled the power vacuum left following the removal of Emperor Pu-Yi. Their weak ideologies and failed reforms lead to the violent and destructive warlord era that lasted from 1916 until 1927. It was the brutality of this regime that fuelled future leaders like Mao into the belief that, ‘ Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun’. For this reason, the warlord era advanced the Chinese Revolution through the disunity and fragmentation it created but also through the vicious extremist ideologies it ignited. Despite the formation of the United Front between the GMD and CCP in order to combat the warlords retarding the approach of civil war, this alliance broke down by 1927 when the GMD purged the CCP. Chiang Kai-shek’s White Terror in 1927 demonstrated the temporary nature of the United Front and stresses the deep resentment between opposing ideologies. Furthermore, Chiang’s resistance to defend Manchuria against Japan and various foreign encroachments instead focusing on the annihilation of the Communists disillusioned many, Jung Chang’s father included, she writes, ‘ the communist slogan “ Chinese must not fight Chinese”... and the Communist stance about fighting the Japanese and about creating a just society fired [my father’s] imagination and he joined the party in 1938’. Consequently, Chiang was deeply unpopular,

increased political polarisation ensued, feuds and purges accelerated the existing factors that stemmed from imperialism.

Spain too endured unstable political leadership as well as deep internal divisions, however, without the Chinese threat of invasion and foreign infringement a swinging pendulum of governments developed. Radical reforms were introduced, removed and then reintroduced with each election. Chaos erupted. The first, Left Republic of 1931 introduced a series of highly contentious laws; Catalonia was granted a degree of autonomy following secession campaigns, there was nationalisation of the land and most controversially, the Church was entirely separated from the state. Church bell ringing was banned, Catholic Schools closed and Church land redistributed. The traditional and conservative core of Spain were enraged, the Church became a martyr with which the landowners and Right united to form CEDA. Even the Left was aggravated by the reforms that they felt lacked depth and passion, as a result, the Socialists withdrew support and the Left suffered electoral defeat in 1933. The triumphant Right Wing Republic then instigated what became known by the Left as the *bienos negros*, two years where all reforms were reversed, socialism and anarchism repressed. Declarations of Communism in the Asturias region in 1934 were brutally suppressed by General Franco's forces, three-thousand were killed. The Left, fearing a Right wing dictatorship then formed the Popular Front. In 1936, there was a pendulum swing back to a Popular Front led government. Peasants began seizing land they felt was now theirs, the Falange and Church launched uprisings and revolts against the left. From February to July of 1936 there were three-hundred political killings. The revenge killing of

Sotello was manipulated by the Right to justify a brutal and extreme coup, the start of Civil War. The result of such a turbulent and ever-changing political landscape was division, division within the already divided factions. The Left Bloc governments angered their support because of the diverse ideologies between groups, the Right too comprised of various groups with wildly differing objectives. Thus every government failed to appease each individual assemblage. Elwood suggests it was this lack of consensus over anything that caused disillusionment with democratic politics and brutal caciquismo political polarisation of which only violence could conquer.

Infamously, Carr branded the Spanish Civil War ' a European civil war fought on Spanish territory'. A proxy war for the amplified political tensions of Europe post-WWI, the first major battle between Fascism and Communism. Equally, the Chinese Civil War was caused by ideological conflicts between incompatible parties. The GMD a nationalist yet democratic party following the ' three principles of the people' deeply contested the CPP philosophy, based in the signification of Marxism, Mao Zedong believed China's revolution should be peasant-led. These conflicting values produced a series of conflicts culminating in two civil wars that straddled WWII. Chiang's abhorrence of the CCP resulted in his White Terror Campaign in 1927 where the GMD turned savagely on the allied CCP, purging 5000 known communists and sympathisers in Shanghai alone. GMD troops pursued the CCP into Jiangxi where, for seven years, and through five encirclements campaigns the remnants of the CCP fought against persistent Nationalist assaults. These intractable problems forced the CCP into a march of



martyrdom know as the Long March, engraining an impassioned need for justice into their plight.

In Spain, however divisions spread further and more intricately. In George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, he describes the internecine that blighted both the Left and Right as, 'hatred between those nominally on the same side, especially Stalinists and Trotskyists'. Significantly on the Left, divisions between Anarchist, Socialist, Marxist and Trade Unionist factions led to disunity and disagreement. The entrenchment of these differences meant that no democratic process could focus the varying priorities. Moreover, the colossal polarisation and radicalisation of politics between Left and Right directly opposed the Republic, the basis for a vicious and unrelenting war. Whereas, in China the extremity of fascism was not present, and although equally as divided as Spain, internal division was minimal and insignificant. In China, there was a common aim; a strong independent nation and so, although the ideological differences provided basis for civil war, the tensions were not significant themselves to cause war.