

# The Spanish Civil War

Analysis of the Nature of the Franco Regime and Theoretical Explanations for the  
Causes of the War

By

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## **Introduction**

This paper examines two broad questions. The first is to examine the politics of Spain under Francisco Franco through the lens of existing theories from previous research on the Spanish Civil War and draw conclusions on the type of regime that Franco administered during the war. This section also looks for fascist tendencies in the Franco regime and if the regime should be classified as a military, personalist, or party regime, as outlined in Barbara Geddes' (1999) theoretical research on authoritarian regimes. The second portion of this paper examines the political dynamics and coordination games that lead to democratic backsliding and regime transitions. Collective action and coordination games play a role in the overthrowing of regimes, and these political processes help reveal the motives and goals of the regimes that clinch power. To understand these processes, a case study from Spain during its Interwar period will be used as a firsthand example of the coordination games and collective action problems that many movements face during a both civil war and a coup attempt. Broadly, this paper's purpose is twofold: to classify the type of authoritarian regime Franco administered, as well as to understand the political processes that preceded Franco's ascension to power.

### **Question 1, Part 1: Was Spain Under Franco a Fascist Regime?**

Although most scholars concur that Spain under Franco from 1936-1939 was an authoritarian regime, much debate has centered on the specific type of authoritarian regime Franco established. Questions of whether the Franco regime was fascist or simply authoritarian have been raised and analyzed. Michael Mann's (2004) analysis and theoretical framework on the main components of a fascist regime include four testable components: organic nationalism, paramilitarism, statism, and class transcendence. When

looking for Mann's fascist components in Francoist Spain, it proves difficult to confidently classify the type of regime that Franco employed because the regime succeeds in some regards, but fails in others (Mann 2004). However, although Spain under Franco had some components of a fascist regime, it should not be classified as fascist due to its lack of vital fascist machineries, such as a paramilitary and class conflict transcendence.

When looking for organic nationalism in the context of the Franco regime, it seems clear that nationalism was a strong component of the regime's structure. Mann's (2004) definition of organic nationalism centers on how fascists had a strict interpretation of the enemies of their country (domestic and international ones), and many fascist regimes employ "cleansing" (ethnic or political) of any minorities that do not fit their definition of the "integral" nation. In the context Spain under Franco, political cleansing of Republic supporters and those with political beliefs in contradiction of the Franco regime was widespread and brutal: some claim that Franco executed more political dissenters than Adolph Hitler. During the civil war, Nationalists led many assaults against Communists, Anarchists, Socialists, and supporters of the Republic, with death tolls reaching 200,000 from some sources. Additionally, once Franco gained control of the country, he implemented a statute called the "Law of Responsibilities", which made it illegal for any Spanish citizens to support the Republic or join any Republic organizations. Around 23,000 Republicans were executed by the Franco regime as a result of this law (Mann 2004). Franco's extensive political cleansing in Spain supports the presumption that Spain under Franco had at least one element of Mann's four main components of fascism: organic nationalism.

Moving away from organic nationalism, paramilitarism was a component of the Franco regime, but not during the Interwar period. Paramilitarism, defined as explicit use of violence to achieve political ends, was not visible in Spain during the Interwar period, but multiple sources reference the Political-Social Brigade (BPS) as a secret police force employed by Franco to suppress any dissenters undermining the regime. However, the BPS was founded in 1941, and Francoist Spain from 1936-1939 did not have an organized secret police or any noticeable paramilitaristic structures (Rama 2011). Although the political cleansing by Nationalists during the civil war appears as a paramilitary structure, it was not structured the same as in Nazi Germany or in other fascist regimes. Therefore, there is no concrete evidence that the Franco regime had a paramilitary from 1936-1939, which weakens the argument that the regime was fascist.

Another key component of a fascist regime, statism, appears in many respects in Spain under Franco. When Mann details his definition for statism, he references that statism is essentially the state having significant power over social, economic, and moral development. In terms of economic development, Franco employed capitalistic policies such as “Barracks Autarchy” and other state-controlled economic policies. In terms of moral development, the regime’s political cleansing was a defining moral agenda for the regime to cleanse the nation of radicals and Republic supporters. Lastly, the Franco regime employed a number of social policies, such as giving subsidies to the Catholic Church and giving them control over Spanish education (Mann 2004). Considering the three main features of statism, the Franco regime seemed to employ many state-led policies and tactics that reduced regional autonomy, which supports the argument that the Franco regime had elements of fascism.

A defining component of a fascist regime is the ability of the regime to transcend class conflict, and the Franco regime failed in completing this goal. Mann identifies the ability of the regime to transcend social classes as a defining goal of a fascist regime. Although many fascist regimes do not achieve this goal, the Franco regime failed especially in this regard. Instead of conjoining both the upper and lower classes and bringing them into the regime, the Franco regime took mostly upper class, educated Spaniards. In fact, the regime actually suppressed lower class organizations through various government policies. In short, the Franco regime was an upper-class-focused administration, not a class-transcending regime (Mann 2004). While many fascist regimes fail in fully transcending class conflict, the Franco regime exacerbated this conflict, which undercuts the argument that Spain under Franco was a genuine fascist regime.

While it is difficult to classify the Franco regime as either fascist or simply authoritarian, it lacks two fundamental components of a fascist regime. Because it lacks these two key components, it should not be classified as a fascist regime. In terms of organic nationalism, Spain under Franco was a textbook example because of its use of political cleansing and suppression of regime dissenters. Turning to statism, Franco employed many government-run policies throughout the Interwar period that indicated it had control over various aspects of the country. However, Spain under Franco lacked a sizeable paramilitary apparatus, which is a foundational component of a fascist regime. Furthermore, the Franco regime not only failed in transcending class conflict, but it also worsened this conflict through policies disproportionately benefitting upper-class Spaniards (Mann 2004). In summation, while the Franco regime experienced organic

nationalism and statism, it lacked a paramilitary and failed in transcending class conflict, and the two latter are key components of fascism. Therefore, the Franco regime should not be classified as a fascist regime, but as an authoritarian one.

**Question 1, Part 2: What type of Authoritarian Regime was Spain under Franco?**

Moving away from the question of fascism in Francoist Spain, the regime can be classified further in terms of authoritarianism. To understand the specific type of regime Franco established, the Franco regime should be classified as personalist, military, party, or a combination of these regime theories. This section addresses the questions many scholars have raised about the authoritarian nature of the Franco regime. Barbara Geddes' (1999) research details the qualifications for each of these regime classifications, and this portion analyzes Francoist Spain and looks for the qualifications that Geddes outlines in her research. Lastly, this portion examines the preferences, governmental procedures, factionalism, responsiveness to popular pressure, and personality cult of the Franco regime. Although the Franco regime from 1936-1939 may have shown early indications of a military regime, the regime quickly transformed from its military upbringings and formed an authoritarian regime best classified as personalist.

The preferences and goals of the Franco regime seemed less concerned with militaristic objectives and more on personal power goals. Geddes argues that a military leader would be willing to leave power once he or she gains power and achieves the militaristic goals and change they desire. In many cases, military leaders stage a coup, take power over the country, make the necessary changes to the military, and step down from power. However, Franco did not seem focused on simply fixing the military in Spain and relinquishing power over the country. Although he made a number of changes

to the military once in power, Franco took near-full control over the country's military, economic, and social policies. Also, Franco did not return to the military once he made changes to the country's military; he stayed in power for nearly four decades. Therefore, the goals of Franco seem less focused on militaristic modifications and more on personal goals of attaining complete power over the country.

Another way to test if the Franco regime was militaristic, personalist, or party is to look at the way the regime made decisions and appointments. In terms of the Franco regime, most decisions were top-down; every political appointment and governmental decision came directly from Franco. Although Franco had a cabinet and a number of advisors, it seems probable that decisions came directly from him. However, it is difficult to factually support this argument, for this is not an empirically-based argument.

Therefore, after looking at the decision-making processes of the Franco regime, the regime appears personalist, but this argument is weak due to the lack of concrete facts or empirical support.

Besides decision-making, the prevailing factionalism in Francoist Spain strongly supports the argument that the regime was personalist at its core. When dealing with differing factions in Spain, Franco was strict and brutal and eliminated any factions or groups that undercut his regime. In fact, the term "White Terror" was used to explain the massive political cleansing of Republic supporters and others with radical political viewpoints; he had no place for any Spanish factions who challenged his regime. His ruthless and unforgiving response to any form of factionalism undergirds the argument that Spain under Franco was a personalist regime.

Besides factionalism, looking at the degree of responsiveness helps uncover if the Franco regime was truly a personalist regime. Degree of responsiveness refers to the incorporation of others not directly in the regime's inner circle. While Franco suppressed many factions in Spain, he had room for others. Franco did not identify with the Falangists, Carlists, or the Catholic Church, but he needed these groups to gain widespread popular support for his regime. Franco staffed a number of government seats with Falangists and Carlists, which were indications of him using these groups to gain added support. In regards to the Catholic Church, Franco initially distanced himself from the Catholic Church. But, later in the regime, Franco gave the church significant clout over the Spanish education sector. While Franco suppressed some groups, he found a way to deal with others and put them into his plan to run the country. This somewhat high degree of responsiveness in the Franco regime supports the argument that the regime was a personalist one.

The last test to discover the type of authoritarian regime that Franco commanded is to look at the personality cult of Franco through his speeches and other specific examples that elevate Franco to a godlike leader. In terms of speeches, Franco spoke boldly, and in many cases he elevated his regime and himself to a power greater than divine. In a 1939 radio broadcast victory speech by Franco, he welcomes all Spaniards who undermined his regime during the civil war, saying, "We welcome to our [regime] all who have repented [to the regime] and wish to collaborate in the greatness of Spain" (General Franco's Broadcast 2011). In a later speech, Franco states that God himself cannot stop the enemies of Spain, but he is the only one able to protect Spain from adversaries (Franco 2008). Besides speeches, Franco had the 5 Pesetas printed with the

inscription “Franco, Caudillo of Spain by the Grace of God”, which seems to support his fixation on divinity (Payne 1997). After examining various aspects of Franco’s rhetoric, Franco’s numerous references to divinity support the argument that his personality cult resembles a personalist-style regime.

Moving on from this theoretical test, there is strong evidence that the Franco regime started out as a military regime, but transitioned to personalist in 1939 after Franco gained absolute power and eliminated his opposition. In 1936, the coup of Spain’s Second Republic resulted in a military regime that was headed by Franco and a number of other military leaders. Emilio Infantes, a staff officer during the Civil War, was promoted to Brigadier-General of the Spanish Army in Morocco after Franco took power and held various other administrative positions in the regime. However, after Franco secured his spot as the absolute leader, he began replacing a number of military seats in his regime with other factions, such as for Falangists and the Catholic Church. In 1939, he appointed two Carlist generals. Also, Franco reorganized his cabinet to give the Falangists a “delicate balance” in his regime (Payne 1987). After examining Franco’s appointments from 1936-1939, he initially focused on mostly military appointments, but began appointing more broadly-based factions once he solidified his position in 1939. It seems likely that Franco began his regime as military-focused, but once he gained absolute power in 1939, he made appointment decisions that seemed similar to a personalist regime.

After careful examination of the Franco Regime through the theoretical lens of Geddes’ (1999) argument, the Franco regime is best classified as personalist. Instead of relinquishing power once he made necessary changes to the military, Franco seized

power and began appointing many cabinet members and leadership positions that were not related to militaristic goals. After appointing a number of military leaders during the civil war, he began placating other factions in the country, such as Falangists and Carlists (Payne 1987). Additionally, his personality cult focused somewhat on the divine power of the regime. In sum, Franco began his 1936 regime focused on militaristic goals, but switched to more personalist goals after solidifying his absolute power in 1939.

**Question 2, Part 1: An Overview of Collective Action and Coordination Games in Francoist Spain**

When democratic governments are overthrown through the use of collective action by using coups and incumbent takeovers, organization is the most important aspect of the process. This section overviews the strategies that many movements employ by using examples from the Interwar period in Spain. When looking at collective action in the context of Spain's Interwar period, it is apparent that the success of a coup depends predominantly on the organizational strategy of the rebel forces. The Nationalists under Franco and Mola organized a "Coups from the Top" and employed sweeping recruitment strategies to gain popular military support from many groups (Singh 2014).

Many rebel and government forces use tactics to exaggerate their military successes, and these strategies are seen in Spain during the civil war. One common way either rebel or government forces exaggerate their success is by taking control of a radio broadcast that is transmitted to the citizens and military personnel. In these radio broadcasts, the rebels or current government can claim that they have succeeded in conquering the other side and argue that any allegiance to the other side is futile. In Spain, a leftist naval officer took control of a crucial radio naval transmitter on the

Spanish coast and rallied support for the leftist government forces. This was a significant effort that may have brought many naval officers to side with the Republic forces. This strategy is one of many used to solve the coordination problem and bring both forces to the same side.

While Singh (2014) argues that taking large cities and symbolic locations is effective in staging a successful coup, Franco and the Nationalists forces failed in this regard. In Spain, Mola's revolt failed in most major cities: Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, and Bilbao. With the leftist forces far more organized in these symbolic major cities, the revolt failed to succeed in taking symbolic locations and large metropolises throughout Spain; only around one-third of the military forces in Spain supported the revolt at first, and the only major successes were in preexisting rightist regions of Spain. Despite these concerns, the revolt seemed to gain traction, but mostly due to successful recruitment, organization, and military resources.

A foundational element of staging a democratic regime overthrow is by recruiting a large amount of military officers, and Spain's Nationalist uprising struggled in this regard. Many successful military takeovers require a large block of support from military forces. The symbolic start of the civil war in Spain, the 18<sup>th</sup> of July, was joined by a surprisingly small amount of military officers. Although the Spanish Nationalists had a small base of military support, most successful coups usually require a broad base of support from at least one section of the military. One of the reasons why the revolt was successful despite such little military support was because the leader of the revolt, Mola, recruited other factions. Mola tried recruiting many factions that opposed the leftist government, and struck an agreement in 1936 with Carlist leader St. Jean de Luz for full-

fledged Carlist support for the revolt. With the support of the Carlists, Mola gained a boost in support for the revolt that increased the group's chance of success (Payne 2014). This strategy of recruitment is yet another approach to coalescing multiple factions in a collective action effort to take power over a regime.

Singh's (2014) empirical analysis of coups argues that military rank matters in coups; a successful coup is more likely when the revolt stems from top military officers, and the revolt's origination came from many top military leaders. With his organizational skills and established military clout, Mola began recruiting Franco and many other top military leaders for the revolt. Franco was a leading officer in the Moroccan war effort, and his allegiance to the revolt was decisive in leading a successful coup. Franco was successfully recruited for the revolt, and used his "circle of friendship in the army" to recruit top military officials to the cause (Payne, 2014, pg. 92). Also, Mola recruited Gonzalo Queipo de Llano, the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> District of the Spanish Army. Additionally, José Sanjurjo was a leader of the coup and a ranking general in the Spanish Army (Payne 1997). With so many top military officials, the Spanish revolt could disseminate information to lower military officials and use established military resources and organization to their advantage, leading to their eventual success. This strategy promoted collective action because the top military officials used their influence and power to convince lower officers to join the rebellion.

Besides collective action, coordination problems play large roles in the power dynamics in coups and regime overthrows, especially in Spain. Coups are complex power struggles in which two sides (e.g. the existing government and the rebel military force) play a "chess match" to garner support from other military leaders. This complex power

struggle of garnering support for each side is played out in a number of ways that are mentioned in the previous section, but this section examines Spain's Interwar period through the lens of Singh's (2014) theoretical framework. Singh perceives coups not as battles or elections, but as a coordination game in which each side wants to avoid a civil war. The argument that coups are coordination games is supported after examining the political dynamics in Spain during the Interwar period.

Coordination games are similar to the "Battle of the Sexes" game theory model, and this model helps understand the civil war movement in Spain. In this model, both actors benefit if they both defend the regime or both rebel. The reason both benefit from remaining on the same side is because, if both actors are on different sides, they may enter into a civil war. In Spain under Franco, many military actors faced the decision to either support the rebellion or remain in support of the Republic. In terms of the military, many officers in Spain were very reluctant to join the movement, and many did not join the rebellion for fear of joining a hopeless cause. Also, previous military involvement in politics had been unsuccessful in years past, and so many officers were reluctant to join for this reason. However, many military officers joined Franco after weighing both sides and coming to the "negative conclusion" that the Nationalist forces were likely to succeed (Payne 2000, pg. 91). A possible reason that many military officers came to this negative conclusion stemmed from the collective action of the Nationalist forces, such as the recruiting of important military leaders by Mola (Payne 2000). As the Nationalist forces began gaining increased traction in Spain, many military officials began switching to the Nationalist because they saw them as the stronger side.

The organization of the Spanish Nationalists under Mola and Franco was cunning and led to their eventual success in the rebellion. By recruiting top military officials from different sections of the military, the Nationalists received military resources and preexisting organization that allowed top military officials to disseminate information to lower military officials. While the Nationalists failed in conquering large Spanish cities and military support dwindled in 1936, the rebellion succeeded due to its top-down military organization. After observing Singh's (2014) examples of various collective action strategies and examining them in the context of Spain, the Nationalist rebellion employed organizational collective action through top-down leadership to garner more support for their side. Also, the coordination game between either staying loyal to the Republic or defecting was also observed in the context of the Spanish Civil War.

A test that is useful to understand a coup attempt is to examine the devolved military power in a country. In most cases, countries with more devolved military power are more likely to stage a successful coup than more power-centralized and unified militaries. In order to test for this variable in the Spanish Civil War, the number of Spanish soldiers as well as ranking military officers overseas was compiled and compared to the total number of Spanish soldiers and ranking military officers in the military. This original test created by the author will determine if the Spanish military had much of its power located abroad instead of inside the country, which could have led to the coup attempt in 1936.

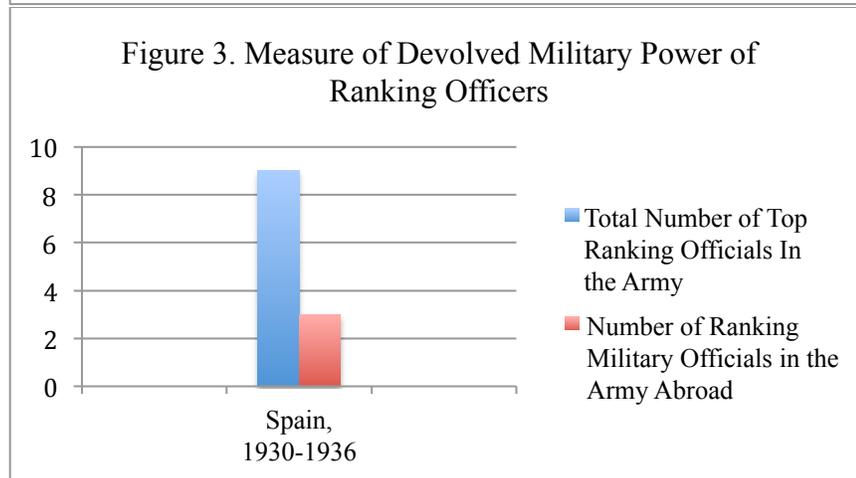
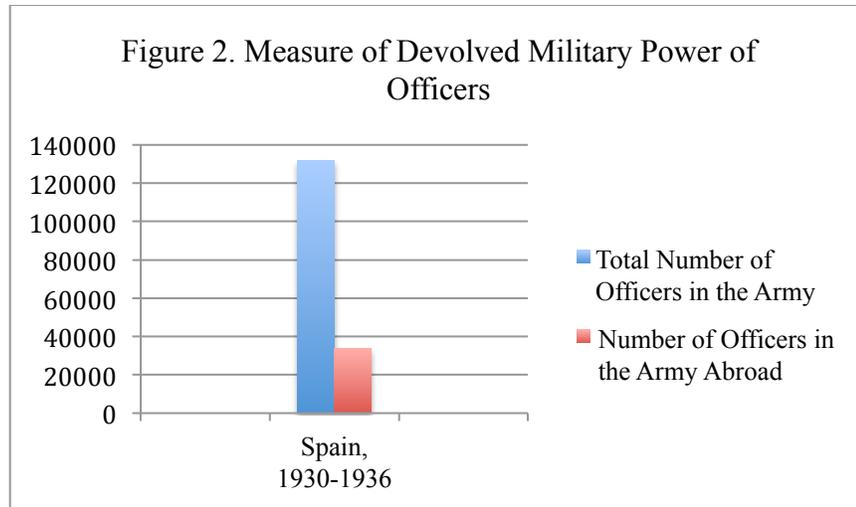
Figure 1. Measure of Devolved Military Power in Spain

$\% \text{ of Decentralized Officer Power} = \frac{A_a}{A_t} \times 100$ <p> <math>A_a</math> = Total Number of Officers Abroad  <math>A_t</math> = Total Number of Officers in the Army </p> $\% \text{ of Decentralized Ranking Military Power} = \frac{A_r}{A_{tr}} \times 100$ <p> <math>A_r</math> = Total Number of Ranking Military Officers Abroad  <math>A_{tr}</math> = Total Number of Ranking Military Officers in the Army </p>
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Source: Created by the author.

Table 1. Measure of Devolved Military Power in Spain and the Weimar Republic

	Spain (1930-1936)
Total Number of Officers in Country	131,838
Number of Officers Abroad	34,000
Total Number of Top-Ranking Officials In Army*	9
Number of Top- Ranking Officials in the Army Abroad*	3
Final Score 1 (% of Total Army Abroad)	25.789%
Final Score 2 (% of Ranking Officials abroad)	33.333%



Source: Created by the author. Data from Thomas (2002), Bowen and Alvarez (2007), and Woolman (1968).

\*In this study, a top ranking military official is defined as a commander of an entire legion or battalion as well as the governmental positions of minister of defense or prime minister. Only top-ranking military officials were chosen rather than lower-ranking generals or colonels.

This brief study examined the military structure of Spain from 1930-1936, and the military was marked by only a small amount of internationally-stationed troops in the country. Following the abdication of General Primo de Rivera after his successful coup and dictatorship, the Spanish Second Republic introduced martial reforms aimed at reducing the top-heavy military structure by offering early retirement for leaders. These reforms also cut the number of officer corps in half (Bowen and Alvarez 2007). After the

end of the Rif War in 1925, Spain repatriated thousands of Spanish officers from Morocco, thus drastically lowering the number of soldiers in the protectorate to around 34,000. After this repatriation, only 26% of the Spanish military was situated in Morocco. Although a number of Spanish military leaders such as Franco and Brigadier-General Emilio Mola were still located in Morocco, the vast diaspora of the Spanish military back to the homeland also reduced the number of Spanish ranking officers by 30% since the early 1920s (Bowen and Alvarez 2007). Also, after the end of the Rif War, the 33,000-strong international brigade serving under the Spanish Army was eliminated, therefore decreasing the total number of officials abroad and removing a large sector of the Spanish military (Thomas 2002). In summation, the end of the Rif War and the reforms of the Spanish Second Republic decreased the number of soldiers as well as ranking officers abroad, which could have led to the largely unsuccessful coup by Franco in 1936. Since much of the Spanish army was located inside the country instead of in the protectorate, the coup gained little traction in Spain, especially in large cities such as Madrid and Segovia.

### **Conclusion**

After analysis of the Franco Regime and the political dynamics present in the Spanish Civil War, it is clear that there are varied interpretations of the nature of the Franco regime. Much research has analyzed the regime and tested for the presence of fascist tendencies in it. After careful analysis, it appears that the regime cannot be classified as fascist, but rather a personalist authoritarian regime. Additionally, the coordination games, collective action, and the devolved military power present in Spain were key factors that played large roles in the civil war. These variables were some of the

many factors that led to a drawn-out and bloody civil war that reshaped Spain and its culture for decades. In conclusion, the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War continues to be a thoroughly-researched yet complex political tragedy that still affects Spanish politics today.

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