

The Spanish Civil War

Causes

The Spanish Civil War had multiple long- and short-term causes: deep social and regional divisions, a weak and unstable political system, the polarising reforms of the Second Republic after 1931, the reaction of conservative forces (army, Church, landowners, right-wing parties), and an immediate trigger in the army coup and the assassination of Calvo Sotelo in July 1936. For IB Paper 2, it helps to organise these into long-term structural causes, medium-term developments under Primo de Rivera and the Second Republic, and short-term triggers in 1933–36.

Long Term Causes 1898 - 1923

1. Socio-economic inequality

Spain remained predominantly agrarian, with huge estates (**latifundia**) in regions like Andalusia and Extremadura owned by a small landowning elite, while landless peasants lived in poverty and underemployment, feeding support for anarchism and socialism. Industrial workers in Barcelona and other cities also faced poor conditions and unemployment, creating a militant labour movement

2. Political instability and oligarchy:

Since the late 19th century Spain was a constitutional monarchy, but real power alternated between Conservative and Liberal elites in a rigged system (the *turno pacífico*), undermining faith in liberal democracy and pushing more Spaniards towards radical left or right solutions.

3. Role of the army:

The army was large, politicised, and accustomed to intervening in politics, resentful of civilian control and of previous humiliations such as defeat in the Spanish–American War and in Morocco. Its conservative officer corps saw itself as guardian of “order,” the Church, and the unity of Spain, setting the scene for a military solution to future crises.

4. Church and state:

The Catholic Church controlled education and social services and was closely linked to the monarchy and landowning elites, making it a target for anticlerical liberals, socialists, and anarchists who blamed it for backwardness.[3][8] Conflict over secularisation, education, and Church privilege became a major ideological fault line.

5. **Regional nationalism:**

Catalonia and the Basque Country developed strong nationalist movements, demanding autonomy or independence due to distinct languages, cultures, and economic interests, clashing with centralist Spanish nationalism.[3][9]

This “problem of regionalism” repeatedly destabilised governments and sharpened debates about the very nature of the Spanish state.

Medium-term developments 1923–31

1. **Dictatorship of Primo de Rivera (1923–30)**

General Primo de Rivera seized power in a bloodless coup backed by King Alfonso XIII, promising order and modernisation] He suspended parliament, censored press and opposition, and relied on the army, undermining what was left of constitutional traditions while failing to resolve underlying problems like agrarian inequality and regional tensions.

2. **Economic and political disillusionment:**

Early public works and economic growth masked deeper weaknesses; after the 1929 crash, unemployment and discontent rose and Primo lost support from both the army and elites, leading to his resignation. The monarchy’s complicity in the dictatorship destroyed its credibility, so when municipal elections in 1931 showed strong support for republicans, Alfonso XIII went into exile and the monarchy collapsed

3. **Causes linked to the Second Republic (1931–33)**

a. Ambitious reform programme:

The new Second Republic (proclaimed April 1931) tried to tackle Spain’s historic problems through reforms of land, army, Church, and regional autonomy.

b. Educational and secular reforms reduced Church control of schools and removed religious symbols from public life, provoking a powerful backlash from the Church and conservative Catholics.

c. Agrarian reform laws aimed to redistribute land to peasants but were slow and bureaucratic, disappointing the left while frightening landowners who saw them as an attack on property.

d. Military reform sought to reduce officer numbers and place the army firmly under civilian control, alienating many officers who later supported the Nationalist uprising.

e. Regional autonomy statutes, notably for Catalonia, pleased nationalists but angered centralists and parts of the army who saw them as undermining national unity

4. **Polarisation and violence:**

Reforms radicalised both sides: conservatives portrayed the Republic as an attack on religion, order, and Spain, while left-wing groups criticised the reforms as too limited and resorted at times to strikes and local uprisings.[5][7] Political violence, church burnings, and repression by police and army weakened the authority of the Republic and normalised force as a political tool.[1]

Short-term causes 1933–36 (right-wing reaction and Popular Front)

1. **Swing to the right (1933–35):**

In the 1933 elections, disillusionment with the left and mobilisation of conservative voters brought a centre-right government to power, including the CEDA, a mass Catholic right-wing party that many on the left saw as quasi-fascist. This government slowed or reversed key reforms (land, regional autonomy, Church–state separation), which reassured elites but enraged workers, peasants, and Catalan and Basque nationalists.

2. **Asturian uprising and Catalan crisis (1934):**

The entry of CEDA ministers into government in October 1934 triggered a general strike and a major left-wing uprising in Asturias that was brutally repressed by the army, deepening hatred between left and right.[4][7] At the same time, an attempt by Catalan leaders to declare a Catalan state was crushed, further embittering relations between regional nationalists, the army, and Madrid

3. **Growing belief in “two Spains”:**

By the mid-1930s, many Spaniards believed compromise was impossible: conservatives feared a socialist or anarchist revolution, while the left feared a fascist takeover modelled on Germany or Italy.[2][10] This atmosphere of mutual fear and demonisation made a negotiated political solution increasingly unlikely.

Immediate triggers in 1936

1. **Popular Front victory (February 1936):**

A coalition of left-wing parties (the Popular Front) narrowly won the elections, promising to resume reforms and release political prisoners from 1934, which alarmed conservatives, the army, and the Church.[7][10] The new government struggled to control waves of land seizures, strikes, street clashes, and right- and left-wing violence, further eroding order and confidence in parliamentary politics.

2. **Army conspiracy and assassination of Calvo Sotelo:**

Senior right-wing officers, including Emilio Mola and Francisco Franco, began planning a coup soon after the Popular Front victory, encouraged by conservative civilians and elements of the Church.[1][6] The murder of prominent monarchist leader **José Calvo Sotelo** by left-leaning security forces in July 1936 became the final catalyst, convincing many hesitant officers to join the conspiracy and providing a pretext for the uprising.

3. **Military rising and start of war:**

The coup began on 17 July 1936 in Spanish Morocco and quickly spread to mainland garrisons, but it did not achieve a swift nationwide victory, leaving Spain divided between Nationalist and Republican zones.[1][6] The failure of the coup to succeed outright transformed a planned putsch into a full-scale civil war that lasted until 1939.[6]

How to use this for Paper 2

- Structure essays by 'time frame' (long-term, medium-term, short-term causes) or by 'theme' (political, social, economic, ideological, military).
- Show that no single cause was decisive: emphasise how structural weaknesses plus polarising reforms and an army conspiracy combined to make war likely.
- Integrate specific events (Primo de Rivera's coup, the 1931 reforms, 1934 Asturias, 1936 elections, Calvo Sotelo's assassination) as evidence to support thematic arguments, not just as narrative.