The Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939

Spain had undergone political turmoil since the collapse of its empire in the nineteenth century. Although this civil war was not Spain’s first, it was by far the most divisive and destructive and foreshadowed the turmoil that would envelop all of Europe by the end of the decade.

The war began with a military revolt in the Spanish protectorate of Morocco against the newly elected Republican government in Madrid. The Nationalist uprising that Generalissimo Francisco Franco would come to lead was supported by conservative elements in the country, including the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and monarchists, and received military aid from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The Republicans were supported by Socialists, Communists, anarchists and other leftists, and received support from the Soviet Union, which hoped to establish a Soviet satellite in Spain. Foreign volunteers, organized into the famed International Brigades, were also important Republican allies. Eventually, the unity of Nationalist forces under Franco’s authoritarian will and foreign military aid helped defeat the fractured forces of the Republicans, who at times fought one another. The war’s unprecedented coverage by the media engaged the entire world in the Spanish struggle, which also became a testing ground for devastating new weapons that would decimate soldiers and civilians alike in the years to come.