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## The Spanish Civil War: an avoidable tragedy

In the early months of 1939, victory for Franco's Nationalist forces in the Spanish Civil War became inevitable. The elected Republican government began planning peace negotiations – only for a treacherous army commander to derail their hopes for an end to violence. Here, Paul Preston reveals how Colonel Segismundo Casado's actions led to tragedy



April 1, 2019 at 4:09 pm

In the last days of January 1939, a shivering column of people tramped north through Catalonia towards the French border, some clutching a few possessions, some carrying infants. The weather was bitterly cold, with sleet and snow falling on the fearful throngs. But waiting for better conditions was not an option: the Nationalist forces of General Francisco Franco were bearing down on Barcelona – and 450,000 terrified women, children, old men and defeated soldiers fled, in anticipation of the horrors he would surely visit on



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them. Those who could find transport squeezed into any kind of vehicle imaginable, though many were forced to walk 100 miles or more to the border.

Franco's forces took the Catalan capital on 26 January, two and half years after the military uprising against the Republican government that had sparked the Spanish Civil War. And though the refugees undertaking this exodus later dubbed *La Retirada* ('the retreat') posed no military threat, the defeated masses were ruthlessly bombed and strafed by German and Italian aircraft in Franco's service.

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It is impossible to calculate how many died on that horrific journey, but those Spaniards who reached France and makeshift internment camps there at least escaped the fate planned for them by Franco. And even after his victory in the north, there remained a huge area – about one-third of Spain, between Madrid and the Mediterranean – in which thousands of Republicans were left to face the wrath of the ascendant Nationalists.

From the start of the war, Franco had waged a deliberately slow campaign to purge Spain. To guarantee the survival of his future dictatorship he was determined to annihilate as many Republicans as possible, and the occupation of each section of conquered Republican territory was followed by a savage repression. What followed the fall of Barcelona was more horrifying even than the atrocities that had gone before.

This is the story of the last days of the Spanish Republic, of the final two months of the war – and of an avoidable humanitarian tragedy that cost many thousands of lives and ruined thousands more. Of the many protagonists in the conflict, this story centres on three individuals, key players in the Republican cause. One, Dr Juan Negrín – the prime minister of the Republic – tried desperately to prevent the tragedy. The other two bore responsibility for what transpired. Professor Julián Besteiro behaved with culpable naivety, while Colonel Segismundo Casado – commander of the Republican Army of the Centre – acted with a shocking combination of cynicism, arrogance and selfishness.

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On 5 March 1939, just over five weeks after Franco took Barcelona, Casado launched a military coup against Negrín's government. Over the next 25 days, his junta engaged in a mini-civil war, botched evacuations and ensured that the Republican fight would end in disaster.

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After the fall of Catalonia, Negrín knew that the Republic was defeated. Aware that surrender would facilitate the terrible repression planned by Franco, he pursued a strategy based on sustaining Republican resistance. His hoped-for scenario was that European war would break out and that the western Allies – which, while recognising the Republican government, had followed a policy of non-intervention in Spain – would recognise that the cause of the Republic was theirs. At worst, he planned to arrange the evacuation of those most at risk.

## No surrender

Aware that Franco would reject an armistice, Negrín refused to consider unconditional surrender. On 7 August 1938, he said to a friend: “I will not hand over hundreds of defenceless Spaniards who are fighting heroically for the Republic so that Franco can have the pleasure of shooting them as he has done in his own Galicia, in Andalucia, in the Basque country and all those places where the hooves of Attila’s horse have left their mark.”

The biggest problem facing Negrín was war-weariness. Ordinary people had endured incredible hardship, yet continued fighting to support the Republic that had given them so much in terms of women’s rights, social and educational reform and regional autonomy. However, extreme privation was taking its toll. Families had lost their menfolk, who had been killed or maimed. With each Francoist victory, tens of thousands of men were imprisoned in concentration camps, and more men – older and younger than before – were being conscripted. Acute hunger was exacerbated by the hundreds of thousands of refugees packed into Republican towns that had already become demoralised by intense bombing raids.

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Casado exploited this widespread desperation, and garnered the cooperation of influential socialist intellectual Julián Besteiro. Together with several prominent anarchists and the socialist trade union leader Wenceslao Carrillo , they formed the anti-

Negrín National Defence Council, under the nominal presidency of the army commander-in-chief, General José Miaja .

Casado claimed that his motive was to end unnecessary slaughter. To secure support, he engaged in a massive deceit, making contradictory offers to the different groups who backed his plans.

At the heart of the deception lay the links of both Casado and Besteiro to the Francoist ‘fifth column’ – Nationalist elements within Republican strongholds, working to undermine the war effort through sabotage, propaganda and other tactics. In fact, treachery and sabotage were always a long-term problem for the Republic, partly because the loyalty of many officers was geographical: they continued to serve Republican forces because the Republicans happened to retain power in their location, rather than through political inclination, which in many cases opposed the ruling power. For instance, during the key battle of the Ebro (25 July–16 November 1938) and the defence of Catalonia from late December 1938, Miaja and his chief of staff,

General Manuel Matallana Gómez, blocked diversionary attacks to impede Franco's forces.

The many fifth columnists on Casado's staff included his brother César and his personal physician, Dr Diego Medina. His adjutant, Colonel José Centaño, belonged to Franco's secret service. Of the different promises made to the various elements that made up his junta, the most extravagant – though he seems to have believed them himself – were those made to fellow officers that Franco would respect their pensions and possibly incorporate them into his post-war army.

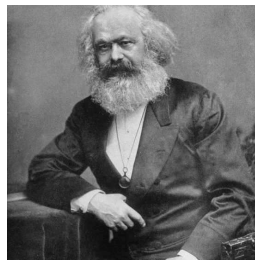
## Anarchist support

To some socialists, Casado offered peace and the delights of humiliating Negrín, whom they had never forgiven for replacing Francisco Largo Caballero as prime minister in May 1937. The most substantial support garnered by Casado, though, was among the anarchists, to whom he promised a more violent war effort. They were blinded to the intentions of both Franco and Casado by their resentment of the Communist Party (PCE) and of Negrín for blocking their revolutionary ambitions and imposing a centralised war effort. They blamed them for every military reverse from the time of the Ebro retreat onwards, thereby ignoring the international situation and the extent to which the war effort had been undermined by the sabotage of professional officers – and, indeed, by the activities of extremists within the anarchist movement.

Casado's mendacity was equalled only by his egomania. He told Dr Medina that he would astound the world, claiming: "The surrender will take place in a way for which there is no precedent in history." Later, in exile, Casado claimed that he had intended to be the *redentor* (redeemer) of Spain. The Republic's senior military strategist, General Vicente Rojo, commented: "He [Casado] is the most political and most crooked and fainthearted of the career officers in the Republican ranks." Even General Miaja referred to Casado privately as "four-faced", because to call him 'two-faced' would barely reflect the reality.

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On 20 February, agents of the Nationalist intelligence service SIPM gave Casado a document listing Franco's 'concessions'. "NATIONALIST SPAIN demands surrender," it read; it did not offer what Casado claimed to his comrades, but instead effectively outlined the imminent repression. It promised to spare the lives of those who surrendered their weapons and were not guilty of murders or other serious crimes, but stated that they would be imprisoned for "the time necessary for their correction and re-education". Casado was delighted, crowing: "Magnificent, magnificent!", and told the SIPM agents that he could organise the surrender of the Republican army "in about two weeks".

When the coup was announced on 5 March, the deceptions were revealed in the statements of the junta's members who were either deluded or lying; in fact, none of Casado's 'cabinet' had the unanimous support of the organisations that they claimed to represent. The defeated in Catalonia were accused of desertion. It was claimed that Negrín was in France, when in fact

he was with his government in Alicante, trying to organise the war effort. Casado's manifesto asserted that: "Not one of the men who are here will leave Spain until everyone who wants to has left, not just those who can." Casado addressed Franco: "In your hands, not in ours, is peace or war" – and effectively ended any possibility of a negotiated peace.

The first initiative taken by Casado's fellow conspirators guaranteed subsequent disaster. While fifth columnists and Falangists fought with Republican forces for control of the naval base at Cartagena, far south-east Spain, the head of the Republican navy, Admiral Miguel Buiza, took the fleet out to sea to pressure Negrín into surrendering to the junta; Buiza was in cahoots with Casado, and the majority of his officers were pro-Francoists.

The warships cast off at midday on 5 March, hours before the coup was launched by Casado, who telegraphed congratulations to Buiza and signed off as 'President Casado'. Once at sea, a majority of Buiza's staff opposed returning to Cartagena, and instead sailed across the Mediterranean to Bizerte, Tunisia; there the fleet was handed over to the French authorities, who later surrendered it to Franco.

## Shattered hopes

Buiza's decision was a devastating blow for Negrín: without the fleet there would be no security for an evacuation. Admiral Cervera, commander of Franco's navy, imposed a total blockade to prevent any merchant ships entering the Republic's remaining ports. Any hopes of an evacuation were also shattered.

When Casado telephoned Negrín and announced his coup, the prime minister offered to negotiate and formally to hand over power. Casado rudely dismissed the offer, and declared the government to be illegal. However, without a formal transfer of powers, Casado's junta would be even more illegal, and would receive no international recognition. Rejecting Negrín's offer meant renouncing access both to government funds held outside Spain and to diplomatic links with other countries, and reflected Casado's (and Besteiro's) overriding urge to humiliate Negrín.

Casado threatened to arrest and shoot the prime minister and his cabinet, and the devastated Negrín made the decision for the government to go into exile. His final declaration pointed out that there was no fundamental discrepancy between the junta's proclaimed objectives and the government's commitment to a peace settlement without reprisals.

Casado's rejection of Negrín's peace overtures – his offer to negotiate with Franco and hand over power to Casado – opened the way to the mini-civil war that Negrín had hoped to prevent, and exposed the utterly naive expectations of the conspirators. In contrast, Negrín was fully aware of the consequences of unconditional surrender. He had witnessed the horrors experienced by the defeated Republicans in France; those refugees had encountered humiliation, but not the trials, torture, imprisonment and executions planned by Franco for those who surrendered.

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Casado then attacked the Communists in Madrid, intending to use them as bargaining chips to be offered to Franco in exchange for concessions. After six days of fighting (during which Franco granted a temporary truce to facilitate Casado's victory), the Communists were defeated. This marked the end of the Republic's cause: the coup, the loss of the fleet and finally the elimination of the Communists removed the most powerful cards that could be used by the Republic in any negotiations with Franco.

Following his exile to Paris, Negrín continued to use government resources to keep the remaining Republican-held centre zone supplied with food and equipment. He had chartered ships to evacuate the tens of thousands fleeing the Francoist advances, but the blockade prevented them from docking in Valencia and Alicante to pick up the evacuees.

In contrast, Casado and his ministers ensured their own escape but did nothing to arrange mass evacuation. Much was needed: as well as merchant ships to carry the evacuees and a fleet to escort them through the Francoist blockade, transport to the coast was required for those most at risk. Passports had to be prepared, along with arrangements for political asylum, and foreign currency obtained. As the British consul in Valencia reported to his country's Foreign Office, the junta's preparations for evacuation "were a shining example of vagueness, muddle, vacillation".

Julián Besteiro, who was named vice-president of the junta, had been introduced to Casado by agents of the fifth column in October 1938. He swallowed the myths they fed him about Franco's clemency, and was convinced that a victorious Franco would embrace the defeated Republican masses. Accordingly, he prevented any government resources being used to finance evacuation, claiming that national wealth was needed for postwar reconstruction, and that Franco would treat those who stayed behind much better for having safeguarded resources.

Besteiro's delusions that there was nothing to fear from Franco saw him remain in Madrid while Casado and the other members of the Junta left for Valencia on 28 March. There, Casado told an international relief delegation that Franco had agreed to allow a period of one month in which to organise evacuation, and that he had ships for 10,000 refugees. Later that day, he admitted that he had no ships and that Franco would take over in three days at most. He also told the delegation that Alicante was the best port from which they might organise an evacuation.

Shortly before leaving Valencia, Casado made a radio broadcast at the request of the Falange – the Spanish fascist party that supplied much of the rank and file of the Nationalist forces – calling for calm and claiming to have secured "an honourable peace without bloodshed". Meanwhile, tens of thousands of desperate men, women and children fled from Madrid on 28 March 1939, pursued by Falangists. They headed for Valencia and Alicante, where Casado had promised there would be ships. The last boats to leave were the British steamers *Stanbrook*, *Maritime*, *Ronwyn* and *African Trader*. They carried 5,146 passengers in total; the *Stanbrook*, one of the ships chartered by Negrín, left Alicante precariously overcrowded with 2,638 refugees. Many smaller vessels – fishing boats and pleasure craft – also made the hazardous journey across the Mediterranean to Algeria.

Over the next few days, thousands of refugees from all over Republican territory gathered in Valencia and Alicante. Some vessels approached the ports but, fearful of interception by the Francoist navy, their captains turned back. In Alicante, the refugees waited in vain for three and a half days without

food or water. Many committed suicide. Children died of exhaustion and malnutrition.

At the end of that time, two ships carrying Francoist troops arrived, and those soldiers violently separated families; any who protested were beaten or shot. Women and children were taken to Alicante, where they were kept for a month in a cinema with little food and no hygiene facilities. The men were herded into the bullring in Alicante or in a large open field outside the town known as the Campo de Los Almendros. For six days, 45,000 men were kept virtually without food or water, sleeping in mud in the open, exposed to the wind and the rain. They were given miniscule rations on just two occasions.

In contrast, Casado and his cronies went to Gandía, about 60km south of Valencia, where Franco had arranged special treatment for them. The port was in the hands of Falangists, who provided refreshments while the junta awaited embarkation on a British warship.

## Shattered hopes

Franco's forces could now advance unopposed, and they took Madrid on 28 March. City after city fell bloodlessly. By 31 March, all of Spain was in Nationalist hands. The bravado of anarchists who had boasted of scorched earth and suicide squads came to nothing.

In privileged exile in London, working for the BBC, Casado never showed any regret or remorse for the actions that had precipitated the collapse of the Republic in the worst imaginable circumstances. In 1961, he returned to Spain, where he was handsomely paid for memoirs published in newspapers and in book form. No mention was made of his dealings with the fifth column and Franco's intelligence services. Negrín, though, was principally concerned with the welfare of the exiles. He arranged for funds to help more than ten thousand Republican refugees travel to and settle in Mexico. When the exiles reached the port of Veracruz in Mexico, the side of the ship carried a huge banner that read 'Negrín was right'.

**Paul Preston is Príncipe de Asturias Professor of Contemporary Spanish Studies at the London School of Economics. His books include *The Last Days of the Spanish Republic* (William Collins, 2016). This article complements the BBC Radio 4 documentary [\*Spain's Lost Generations\*](#).**

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## *The Spanish Civil War: overview of a tragedy*

*In April 1931, following the end of a period of nationalist dictatorship, elections brought widespread urban power to Republicans, King Alfonso XIII left Spain and the Spanish Second Republic was established. With a host of republican, socialist, conservative Christian and, increasingly, fascist factions vying for power, fragile alliances formed a series of governments. A significant element within the rightwing movement was the Falange, an extreme nationalist political group calling for military rule and imperial expansion, founded in 1933.*

*On 17 July 1936, a military uprising against the Republican government was launched by a group of Nationalist officers including General Francisco Franco. The Nationalist military forces enjoyed initial successes in the Spanish protectorate of Morocco, Galicia, Old Castile, Navarra and parts of Andalusia. However, large areas remained loyal to the Republican government, including much of the centre and east, notably the Basque Country and Catalonia, which had been promised autonomy. The country*

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*became embroiled in a vicious civil war between broadly rightwing Nationalists and the leftists who supported the elected Republican government.*

*The Nationalist faction – which included many different movements with a broadly rightwing, anti-communist, pro-clerical slant – was backed by Nazi Germany and Italy, while the Republican cause was supported by the Soviet Union, Mexico and tens of thousands of non-Spanish anti-fascist fighters who joined the International Brigades.*

*Over the following years, the Nationalists gained ground, first taking the north coast and south-west, overwhelming Catalonia in a rapid campaign from December 1938, and taking Madrid – which had been besieged for over two years – on 28 March 1939. By the end of March, they controlled all territory in Spain.*

*The conflict was marked by atrocities by both sides; after Nationalist victory, Franco launched reprisals against his former enemies, including the use of forced labour and large-scale executions of Republicans, hundreds of thousands of whom fled abroad. The total death toll of the war (including executions and bombardment as well as battle) is much debated, but was probably between 500,000 and 600,000. Franco ruled Spain as military dictator till his death in 1975, proclaiming as heir Prince Juan Carlos de Borbón, grandson of Alfonso XIII, who succeeded as King Juan Carlos and began the transition back to democracy.*

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## ***Actors in the endgame***

***Six Republican political and military leaders with key roles in the final months of the war***

### ***1 Dr Juan Negrín***

*Prime minister from May 1937, Negrín attempted but failed to obtain international mediation to halt the war. His plans to negotiate a peace deal with Franco also failed.*

### ***2 Professor Julián Besteiro***

*Socialist politician who, hoping to bring peace, allied with Casado to bring down Negrín's government.*

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### ***3 Colonel Segismundo Casado López***

*Having launched a coup to depose Negrín in March 1939, Casado tried to negotiate a peace settlement with Franco; when that failed, his junta fled to London.*

### ***4 Wenceslao Carrillo***

*Socialist trade-union leader who supported Casado in forming the anti-Negrín National Defence Council, sparking a government rift.*

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## 5 *General José Miaja*

*Commander of the Republican Army in the central zone towards the end of the war, Miaja supported Casado's coup and became president of Casado's junta.*

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