

THE SPANISH REPUBLIC
AT WAR 1936–1939

HELEN GRAHAM

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CHAPTER I

The challenge of mass political mobilisation (1931–1936)

¡Vivan los hombres que nos traen la ley!¹

The coming of the Second Republic saw the emergence of a governing coalition of centre-left republican groups in alliance with the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE). Its reforming agenda was driven by a progressive republican ideology borne by the liberal – but somewhat marginal – sectors of Spain’s urban professional lower middle classes. Their numerical slightness made the support of the PSOE crucial. The PSOE’s own solidity as a support was provided by the electoral muscle of its near million-strong trade union movement, the UGT.

The driving ethos of this 1931 coalition was to modernise Spain economically, to initiate democratising reforms and to Europeanise the country socially and culturally. These objectives were to be attained via a series of legislative measures comprising agrarian, labour and social reforms (including state provision of education). Land reform (predominantly of the vast southern estates) was intended to create a large class of smallholding peasants in the style of France in 1789 whose acquisition of land would make them a permanent support base for the regime. The Republic’s other key reform was of the military. This had crucial political goals – namely to bring the institution fully under civilian constitutional authority and, in time, to republicanise it. By reducing the size of the notoriously ‘top-heavy’ officer corps it was also intended to release much-needed funds to finance the rest of the planned reform programme. Reform is always an expensive undertaking, but the Spanish republicans were embarking upon it at a time when the effects of European and world economic depression were just beginning to be felt.

¹ ‘Long live the men who bring us the rule of law!’ This was the greeting offered in one village to Republican campaigners shortly before the declaration of the Second Republic, cited in E. Montero, ‘Reform Idealised’, in Graham and Labanyi, *Spanish Cultural Studies*, p. 129.

‘Reforming’ the balance of socio-economic and political power in Spain in this way was perceived by the republicans as a means of delivering the classic goals of political liberalism. Increasing rural income levels – and especially those of the landless proletariat of the south – was intended too to create a larger domestic market in order to stimulate industrial growth. While redistribution would also fulfil social democratic requirements of social equity *per se*, republicans also looked to it to create a more inclusive and thus more stable society and polity in which to pursue the national economic growth they sought.

THE POLITICAL FAILURE OF ‘HISTORIC’
REPUBLICANISM (1931–3)

The republican agenda was without any doubt an extraordinarily ambitious and wide-ranging one. In part this reflected the stagnation of the old regime and the long overdue need for basic modernising change to bring Spain into line with its European neighbours. Conservative interests would lose no time in mobilising against change. But even more ominous for the republicans would be the alienation over 1931–3 of social groups whose support was crucial to the viability of the reform project – such as urban and rural labour and sectors of the provincial middle classes. The reasons why this alienation would occur were complex and the underlying problems were in considerable part connected with the context of economic depression. But they were also the result of strategic errors on the part of the republicans themselves.

The republicans had little sense of the need to build active political alliances *bottom up* in society in order to ensure an adequate mass support base for the reforms they wished to make. This blind spot seems ironic given both the accelerating political mobilisation underpinning the Republic’s birth and the new context of representative democracy that it had ushered in. We could explain it in terms of the republicans’ lack of political experience. But while we should not minimise the impact of this, or the obstacles faced by the reformers, this myopia is also indicative of their particular understanding of politics. For the republicans, like the conservatives who opposed them, belonged to an old political world that was, at heart, uneasy with the idea of mass mobilisation. Spanish republicanism was progressive in that it favoured certain structural reforms to redistribute socio-economic power in Spain. But it was also conservative in that modernising reform was envisaged as something to be implemented *top down* by a political elite via the machinery of state.

Indeed, for Spain's republicans, 'the Republic' began and ended with the state. Reform was perceived predominantly as an abstract, intellectual problem – a view nowhere more clearly articulated than in the writings and parliamentary interventions of Spain's pre-eminent republican leader, Manuel Azaña, prime minister of the liberal biennium of 1931–3 and, from May 1936, president of the Republic.² Strongly influenced by regenerationist and Krausist thought, the republicans envisaged an idealised state with extended and renovated powers.³ But the actually existing state in April 1931 was made up of institutions and personnel inherited from the monarchist regime. There would be a significant continuity in the personnel working within the state bureaucracy – *faute de mieux*, since the incoming coalition simply did not have sufficient numbers of experienced, politically conducive individuals at its disposal.⁴ Again, this was in part the inevitable consequence of the long exclusion of the left (broadly construed) from power. But this lack of adequate personnel was also compounded by the republicans' blindspot around political mobilisation. As already mentioned, 'historic republicanism' – dominated by lawyers, professors and educationalists – had previously failed to link up with the relatively populous professional middle-class associations where republican sentiment had developed significantly during the 1920s. By failing to forge such links, the republican political class deprived itself of much-needed technical and managerial expertise as well as losing the opportunity to widen progressive republicanism's popular support base.⁵ This would prove a costly failure. Political republicanism inside the state machine lacked the necessary technical expertise to implement and monitor the detail of reform on a daily basis. But nor, given the republican conception of politics, did they necessarily understand why this was important.

This conception also led the republicans to confuse the theoretical political authority of government with real political *power*. The Spanish republicans had a firm – if somewhat naive – belief in the power of the law

² The idea of the Republic being synonymous with state action was most clearly articulated by him: 'ser republicano era sólo una manera de entender el Estado y las reglas del juego político', J. Paniagua Fuentes, introduction to Azaña's *Discursos parlamentarios* (Madrid: CSIC, 1992). Also, J. Marichal, *El intelectual y la política* (Madrid: CSIC, 1990), p. 78.

³ E. Montero, 'Reform Idealized: The Intellectual and Ideological Origins of the Second Republic', in Graham and Labanyi, *Spanish Cultural Studies*, pp. 124–7. Krausism was a strongly ethical school of philosophy dominant among Spanish liberal reformers in the 1870s and 1880s, based on the work of the post-kantian German philosopher Krause, a contemporary of Hegel.

⁴ On the difficulty of finding appropriate republican personnel, see M. Maura, *Así cayó Alfonso XIII* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1995), pp. 265–72.

⁵ See the introduction above.

(*juricidad*). But while they had the authority to enact a new Constitution⁶ and bring legislation to parliament in Madrid, the task of *implementing* these things would bring the reformers hard up against the reality of how social and economic power in the localities of Spain (above all in majority rural Spain) remained to a great extent in the hands of the old elites.

The images most associated with the Republic's birth – of masses of people in the streets, surging through the squares and open spaces of the capital, clambering over public buildings and monuments, toppling statues of the king – vividly depict the expectations raised by the new regime among socially and economically disenfranchised sectors of the population, something which would further accelerate mass mobilisation after 1931. But the republicans' own political culture and experience did not fit them to exploit its political potential. Indeed, they would soon be responding (for example around issues of public order) in ways that suggested a real fear of the uncontrollability of this process.

But this difficulty belonged not only to the republicans. Their coalition partners, the Spanish Socialists (PSOE), were also in various ways grounded in this statist, *top-down* understanding of political and social change. Those socialists who identified primarily with the parliamentary party rather than the union (UGT) shared much of the republicans' elitist regenerationist ethos, while it was, paradoxically, in the socialists' trade union wing that the republicans' disquiet over mass mobilisation would find its clearest echo. Influenced by their collaboration with the Primo de Rivera dictatorship in the 1920s, the UGT's veteran leaders had envisaged the inheriting of state power in 1931 as a means of squaring a crucial circle. It could ensure expanding membership and influence for the socialist movement while maintaining a high degree of control, thus not risking its organisational structures and patrimony – the traumatic memories of 1917 had left an indelible mark. But when the UGT's membership did begin rapidly to expand (and nowhere more than among the rural south's landless proletariat⁷), then the union leadership's attitude became decidedly ambivalent. For the PSOE/UGT, like most other European socialist movements of the time, had deeply ingrained views on what constituted the 'organisable' working classes. Fears were expressed about the likely effects of the mass influx of the politically uneducated on the fabric of the organisation (its 'historic profile') and on its political

⁶ The Republican Constitution of October 1931 borrowed from previous radical republican experiments (Mexico, 1917 and (especially) Weimar Germany, 1919).

⁷ The urban unskilled – for example on the building sites of Madrid – were another source of anxiety.

mission of reform.⁸ The socialist leaders seemed to have no idea about what to do with the new members flooding in. Nor indeed were they ever really *utilised* as a political constituency – apart, that is, from their sterile deployment in the internecine war inside the socialist movement.⁹

The challenge facing republicans and socialists was twofold. First, they had to mobilise a viable support base for their own reforms. Second, they had to develop strategies to defuse or counter anti-reform movements of opinion that could foreseeably be mobilised against them within the emergent system of mass parliamentary democracy.

But it proved impossible to mobilise an adequate support base. For this to happen, republicans and socialists had to show that they could convert aims into implemented policies. The proposed reforms combined Azaña's 'statist' agenda with the social agenda of the PSOE. But this was far too ambitious a programme to be realisable. Either of the two agendas was, alone, guaranteed to provoke more opposition from powerful elite groups than the government could deal with. Moreover, both Azaña and the socialist union leader, Largo Caballero, overestimated the size of their electoral mandate for reform. Included within the votes sustaining the government coalition there were probably quite a proportion for Alejandro Lerroux's Radical Party and others whose commitment to a reforming agenda was, to say the least, ambiguous. To make matters worse, Azaña and the PSOE discounted the extent to which their mandate for reform was dependent on the support of the CNT's social constituencies who were, thereby, left disenfranchised. In sum, the internal tensions in the republican-socialist reform project would prevent it from ever mobilising a sufficient support base for itself. Nor could it prevent the opposition from counter-mobilising.

Ironically, it was to be precisely those forces hostile to reform that learned to adapt faster to the new political environment. The scale of mass Catholic mobilisation between 1933 and 1936 was perhaps less evidence of Spain's 'polarisation' *per se* than it was of the liberal left's failure to achieve its own prior mass mobilisation, most crucially of some of the lower-middle-class constituencies which then turned to the

⁸ Urgent calls for the mass political education of the new and prospective membership were made at the PSOE's 1932 congress; see J. M. Macarro Vera, 'Causas de la radicalización socialista en la II República', *Revista de Historia Contemporánea* (Seville), 1 (Dec. 1982), p. 203. Similar fears would resurface after the Popular Front electoral victory of February 1936.

⁹ P. Preston, *The Coming of the Spanish Civil War. Reform, Reaction and Revolution in the Second Republic* (henceforward *CSCW*), 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1994); S. Juliá, *La izquierda del PSOE (1935–1936)* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1977) and H. Graham, *Socialism and War. The Spanish Socialist Party in Power and Crisis, 1936–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

populist right, with fatal consequences for the Republican project. For if it had not been for mass mobilised conservative opinion, it would have been difficult for the rebel officers to justify the – essentially Bonapartist – coup of July 1936, even in a country whose civil society was as relatively underdeveloped as Spain's. Although its leaders had been involved in anti-Republican conspiracies since the regime's beginning, it was only the presence of mobilised *civilian* opinion that allowed the military rebels to present their actions in 1936 as if they constituted a popular plebiscite.¹⁰

The stakes in this battle of counter-mobilisation were made clear from the start. From the formal declaration of the Republic in April 1931, powerful sectors of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Spain indicated their irreducible hostility to the political and cultural pluralism at the heart of the Republican project.¹¹ In his pastoral letter of 7 May, Cardinal Segura, the Spanish Primate, offered a provocative homage to the monarchy and in his collective letter of July he publicly declared the doctrine of popular sovereignty to be inimical to Catholic teaching. With these declarations, the contest was now on to form the opinion and achieve the support of 'Catholic Spain' (i.e. the provincial and rural middle classes). But we should be clear that this was about *constituting* a political force, not simply about giving voice to what already existed. For many, maybe most, in the ecclesiastical hierarchy the issues were immediately clear: the Republic was unacceptable *per se* precisely because it was pluralist. But attitudes were much less clear-cut at the outset among lay Catholics and many of the lesser/ordinary clergy. It was only as a result of the specific religious measures implemented by the Republic that these sectors came to be politically and culturally alienated from it more or less *en masse*.

In a country where religious loyalties and piety were as emotive and powerful a mobilising force in some regions as anti-clericalism was (predominantly among working-class constituencies) in others, the Republic simply could not afford to alienate the Catholic laity virtually in its entirety. In these terms, the high-profile anti-clericalism of the republicans' religious reforms was a strategic error of considerable proportions. The chamber elected in June 1931 to draft these reforms was driven by vehement republican hostility to the Catholic Church as an institution.

¹⁰ Cf. the text of Franco's *Discurso del alzamiento* – the radio broadcast made from Tetuán on 17 July 1936 justifying the rebellion in terms of the conspirators' embodying the national will, F. Díaz-Plaja, *La guerra de España en sus documentos* (Barcelona: Plaza y Janés, 1969), pp. 11–13.

¹¹ Bishop Gomá (later Primate of Spain) wrote on 15 April that 'we have now entered into the vortex of the storm', quoted in Lannon, *Privilege, Persecution and Prophecy*, p. 179.

In a mirror image of the right's manichaeism, republicans proved entirely unable to distinguish between state secularisation measures – such as separation of Church and state, the provision of civil alternatives to Catholic marriage and burial, or the provision of non-religious state education – and measures which infringed the democratic rights and sense of identity of ordinary Catholics. In the latter category came legislating for the exclusion from teaching of the religious orders or instituting a plethora of municipal regulations which harassed Catholics daily: impositions on funeral processions, on the ringing of church bells, on the outdoor celebration of patronal feasts. Sometimes wayside shrines were removed, together with religious statues or plaques in village squares. The implications of a secular state would no doubt have been strange and initially unwelcome to many Catholics. But over time they would have been assimilable. At any rate, they were not the stuff of which counter-Republican mobilisation could have been made – unlike those measures which directly interfered with the daily culture and identity of Catholics and which were thus perceived as vindictive.

It may be that a further distinction needs making between republican repression of popular Catholic culture (the cults around local village saints, for example) and the question of educational policy. But even if one were to make a case for the political importance of restricting the teaching role of the religious orders, the fact remains that once again, the republicans failed to implement their policy successfully. Although the debarment of religious personnel was stipulated in the Constitution of 1931, the specific legislation (the Law of Congregations) only reached the statute books in May 1933 – barely five months before the disintegration of the republican-socialist coalition. In other words, little can have happened before the coming to power of a centre-right government that effectively froze the legislation. All the republicans had in fact achieved was the creation of aggrieved constituencies that were, thus, ripe for mobilisation by the enemies of reform. By the same token, the total removal of state financial support for the Church provoked the alienation of the lesser clergy – a sector whose initial position was one of guarded caution but certainly not open hostility to the Republic.

One must also be wary of using late-twentieth-century conceptions of civil rights (ethically compelling though these are) to assess republican religious policy. While we may wish that the republicans had been more liberal in this respect – thinking not least of the perennial philosophical-political debate over means and ends – their illiberalism was of its time. Moreover, they were also rather less illiberal and somewhat more

concerned about constitutional rights (if not yet civil/human rights properly speaking) than their opponents. (Conservative Catholics were outraged that their beliefs and practices were being subjected to restraints. But they themselves entertained no concept of civil and cultural rights within the Spanish state for freethinkers or atheists.) In the last analysis, we have to remember that no aspect relating to the Church in 1930s Spain could be divorced from high politics. For many republicans Catholic culture was, root and branch, a threat to the inculcation of precisely the open, pluralist mentality needed to stabilise the democratic Republic in Spain. (We should remember too that the ecclesiastic hierarchy was the most consistent and vociferous defender of the monarchy in the transitional period from the Primo dictatorship to Republic (1929–31).) Moreover, there was also sometimes an important practical dimension to the republicans' measures: saving on the stipend to clergy, for example, was one way of garnering scarce resources (even scarcer because of the recession) to fund the programme of state school building.

However, perhaps the main point to grasp here for our purposes is that the republicans saw their commitment to secularisation as a matter of fulfilling certain 'historic' republican ideals or ideological principles. Just as with agrarian reform or anti-militarism, it was perceived as another 'cultural north' and borne as a crucial 'mark of identity'. But once again the republicans had failed to think through the material consequences of their policies in the new political environment. So the anti-clerical tendencies of 'historic' republicanism armed a counter-movement without having in place any strategy for dealing with it.

Catholic Action – the organisational hub of what would become the mass Catholic party CEDA (strictly speaking a confederation of various regionally based right-wing groups) – creatively elaborated a propaganda line suggesting that the Church's very existence was imperilled by the atheistic material and spiritual depredations of the Republic. It worked to good effect particularly among the intensely Catholic impoverished smallholders of central and north-central Spain. This process of mobilisation was greatly facilitated by the fact that the Church had a well-established social-organisational infrastructure (i.e. Catholic Action's own) embedded in the localities. The republicans had no comparable structures on which to build. Moreover, the fact that their agrarian reform measures tended to neglect the specific problems of smallholders and tenant farmers also hugely facilitated the mobilisation of such groups by the CEDA – a party that received massive subsidies from the large southern landowners who stood to lose most from the Republic's

agrarian law of September 1932.¹² Anti-clerical legislation alone did not provoke the Spanish oligarchy's campaign against the Republic, but in bringing about practical unity on the right, it massively facilitated the implementation of that campaign.

As a result, the provincial, commercial and rural smallholding classes of the agrarian interior (above all of Castile and Leon) were definitively conquered by resurgent conservatism. Via the CEDA or other conservative agrarian associations such as the CNCA (Confederación Nacional Católico-Agraria¹³) these sectors would effectively be recruited to the political project of agrarian counter-reform. In the process, 'Spanish' nationalism itself was definitively appropriated not only as a force of political conservatism (as had been clearly happening since the 1920s) but now of populist conservatism.

Elsewhere in Spain, on the peripheries – both urban and rural – the picture was less bleak for progressive republicanism. But here too political tension and fragmentation were still the order of the day. Nowhere was this more evident than in relations between the Madrid government and the highly Catholic and socially conservative Basque Country. The Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), which was emerging as a significant political force in the region, looked somewhat askance at 'anti-clerical Madrid' while it was also concerned to keep the PSOE's political influence at bay in Bilbao.¹⁴ This was not only because the PSOE was a socialist party, but also because it was a centralist one. In fact neither side trusted the other. Although the republican-socialist coalition was open to the possibility of a Basque autonomy statute, it wanted to ensure that the devolved powers remained in the hands of Basque socialists and republicans. Following the PNV's – albeit relatively brief and abortive – alliance with the Carlists in 1931, republicans and socialists saw it as representing clerical conservatism and, especially given the anti-constitutional tenor of some of the PNV-Carlist proposals, as far from politically trustworthy.

¹² Preston, *CSCW*; E. Malefakis, *Agrarian Reform and Peasant Revolution in Spain* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1970); A. Bosch, 'Nuevas perspectivas sobre la conflictividad rural en la Segunda República', *Historia Contemporánea*, 9 (1993), 141–66. A recent case study of the south is in F. Cobo Romero, 'El voto campesino contra la II República. La derechización de los pequeños propietarios y arrendatarios agrícolas jiennenses 1931–1936', *Historia Social*, 37 (2000), 119–42 and *Conflicto rural y violencia política* (Jaén: Universidad de Jaén/Universidad de Granada, 1998).

¹³ The political organisation of Catholic smallholders in north and central Spain. Created in 1917, it was a forerunner of the CEDA and provided the core of its mass base.

¹⁴ While the PNV was an influential force, the politically divided nature of the Basque region (i.e. with the strong influence of the traditionalist right (Carlists)) meant that it was not hegemonic. The PNV's influence was predominant in the province of Vizcaya. But in its capital, Bilbao, the PNV had to struggle against the PSOE. F. de Meer, *El Partido Nacionalista Vasco ante la guerra de España (1936–1937)* (Barañáin-Pamplona: EUNSA, 1992), p. 66.

But the PNV, under a new young leadership headed by José Antonio Aguirre, espoused an open and pragmatic conservatism rather than the closed integrist variety of Carlist Navarre. The PNV's political leadership was, moreover, significantly *less* conservative than its own lower-middle-class support base – especially those parts of it located in the rural interior. Accordingly, the pull of the Republican alliance would increase for Aguirre and his party in proportion to their disaffection from the integrist Catholic conservatism represented by the Carlists. (After it had rapidly become clear that an autonomy statute could not be used to bar Republican secularisation and social reform policies from the Basque Country, not only did the Carlists' interest in a statute wane, but they actively joined the monarchist right nationally in obstructing it.) Madrid began to use the prospect of an autonomy statute as a 'carrot' to attract the PNV into the Republican orbit. But the distrust between the two meant that negotiations were inevitably slower and more complex than those for the Catalan equivalent (promulgated in September 1932). There was disagreement particularly about the extent of devolved financial powers and over who should control the police and army in the region. An accord had still not been reached when the centre-right came to power in Madrid in November 1933 and the CEDA's outright hostility to autonomy blocked further progress. This hostility would result in the PNV's gradual, strategic rapprochement (though not entry) to what by the end of 1935 would be a re-emergent republican-socialist coalition. In this the efforts of the PSOE leader, Indalecio Prieto, were paramount. He had close personal ties with the Basque Country and was determined to strengthen the Republican coalition by bringing the PNV into its orbit.

Nevertheless, the basic republican thinking that social and educational reforms would, in the medium term, contribute to stability and development, allowing a new secular mentality to emerge as the basis for the 'Republican nation', remained problematic with regard to the Basque Country, as it did in other ways. However, the fact that a formal commitment to a Basque statute would feature in the electoral programme of the centre-left coalition in February 1936 ensured that the PNV strategically accepted the programme, even though it did not join the coalition. But the political and jurisdictional disputes that had constantly underlain the PNV's tortuous path to a *modus vivendi* with the Republic during 1931–6 meant that the statute would still not have been promulgated when the military rose in July 1936.¹⁵ Once again, Republican Madrid

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 67–72, 77.

would use the statute (which it eventually ceded in October 1936) to tie the industrial Basque Country to its war effort. Crucially, it would also accept PNV leadership of the new provisional Basque wartime government. But the fundamental disagreement over how much power it could deploy would immediately erupt with full force. This was so not least because the centrifugal impact of the military coup would by then already have conferred *de facto* 'powers' on the regions that far outstripped anything the central Republican government had ever intended to concede.¹⁶

A similar jurisdictional dispute would also develop between the central Republican government and Catalan nationalism – in spite of the fact that 1930s Catalanism was clearly on the left and substantively in agreement with the qualitative nature of republican reform, religious, social and agrarian. Catalan nationalism of the centre-left had been a fully subscribed member of the San Sebastián pact in 1930.¹⁷ And when a coalition of political groups formed the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC or Esquerra) in spring 1931, it had appeared the ideal interlocutor for the liberal reformers of Madrid, led as it was by the urban professional classes of Barcelona but with significant rural support in the region. In short, Catalonia, as the most socially variegated area in Spain, had the greatest potential for creating the counter-hegemonic alliance needed to shore up the reforming Republic.

But the Esquerra's relations with the republican-socialist government of 1931–3 were far from easy. In 1931 the Esquerra had initially declared for an independent Catalonia in a federal Spain. But it had agreed to forego this in return for Madrid ceding a statute of autonomy on generous terms. But these terms, as the Esquerra saw it, never materialised. In spite of the empathy over other sorts of structural reform and even though the Madrid republicans recognised the Catalans' claims as licit in principle, in the end their ingrained centralism was stronger. They sought to water down the powers granted under the statute of 1932 and, even then, delayed their transfer. That the Esquerra saw this as a promise broken explains Catalonia's enthusiastic assumption, in the wake of the July 1936 military coup, of *de facto* powers which, Republican president Azaña would complain bitterly, lay beyond the statute.¹⁸

¹⁶ See chapter 4 below for an analysis of wartime relations between the PNV and the central Republican governments.

¹⁷ The 1920s had seen the political leadership of Catalanism pass from the conservative Lliga to the centre-left; see the introduction above.

¹⁸ For example, issuing currency and levying troops.

Nevertheless, right from 1931 the Esquerra was a powerful political force. It dominated in Catalonia in a way that the PNV never did in the Basque Country as a whole. The Esquerra's success here can be gauged by the fact that its identity would rapidly merge with that of the regional government (Generalitat) ceded under the terms of the 1932 autonomy statute. Moreover, in terms of agrarian reform, the Catalan republican left would, between 1934 and 1936, fight and eventually win the right to amend rural tenancies *en masse*. This had the effect of stabilising conditions and increasing security for the small tenant farmers (*rabassaires*) who were the most numerous sector in the Catalan countryside and a source of bedrock support for the Esquerra. The party fought this agrarian war first through legislative reform (the famous *ley de contratos de cultivo*¹⁹) and then in the courts. Finally it was the ballot box, in February 1936, which gave it victory. It would be this defeat that saw Catalonia's (minority) agrarian right – represented by the Institut Agrari de San Isidre – align itself with its counterparts elsewhere in Spain and ultimately, in July 1936, with the military rebels.²⁰

But although the existence of strong regional nationalisms problematised the emergence of an overarching republican nationalism after 1931, it is also true that the Catalan government's dissatisfaction with Madrid was much exacerbated by the fact of economic recession. With greater budgetary resources the Generalitat could, for example, have funded its own schools and thus ensured the dissemination of Catalan language and culture. (Control of education remained beyond the autonomy statute and, while Madrid recognised Catalan as an official language, it required all school instruction to be undertaken in Spanish.) Financial stringency would be responsible for more than the political disappointment of Catalanists, however. For the commitment of the republicans – in Barcelona as much as Madrid – to orthodox, deflationary liberal economics at a time of international depression would make it impossible to provide a credible level of social welfare relief for the urban and rural dispossessed. Had it been possible to include them within a Republican 'new deal', then urban and rural labour (or at least some sectors of it) could have been mobilised as alternative support to compensate for the lack of a sufficiently broad base among middling sectors. But the difficulties here were enormous, as we shall see. It was the abiding distance between the reforming Republic and its potential working-class support base that

¹⁹ The Law of Agricultural Contracts.

²⁰ Conservative Catalan nationalism, in the shape of the Lliga, made some electoral gains around 1933–4, but not enough to unseat the centre-left coalition in Catalonia.

made the price of its anti-clericalism too high. The combination of an uncompromising religious settlement with monetarist economics would deprive the republican-socialist coalition of any minimally sufficient social support base.

After initial high hopes of Republican reform, worker disaffection arrived quickly in metropolitan Spain – and most notably in the industrial heartland of Barcelona. For many workers, their daily experience was dominated by the *absence* of palliative reform (for the Republic had *promised* it²¹) alongside the brutality of what appeared to them to be a largely unreformed state apparatus in action. The underdeveloped Spanish state had long been defined in terms of its security forces. Under the old regime, the police and, *in extremis*, the army had functioned to defend the established social order and elite economic interest in a highly transparent fashion. While the coming of the Republic in principle meant the chance to develop other, integrative, state functions – such as education and welfare – in practice the options here were limited. Even before the worst effects of international depression kicked in, the Republic's scope for enacting social and labour reform or for increasing welfare spending was severely restricted. It was refused foreign loans while at the same time it faced a highly unpromising national economic situation, with a flight of capital as well as substantial debts inherited from the dictatorship – especially in the form of the loans taken out to fund Primo's public works.

The international depression would also take its toll. The underdevelopment of Spanish capitalism (and thus its lesser integration in the international system) meant that the repercussions of the 1930s crisis may have been relatively less in *macro-economic* terms (for example there was no sudden, new phenomenon of mass unemployment as there was in Germany). But we should not make the mistake of assuming that the impact of the crisis was therefore less severe for Spanish workers – who included large numbers of economic migrants obliged to return home. Moreover, Spain *already* had severe structural unemployment and highly casualised and sweated labour patterns which, under the impact of recession, and in the absence of even the most rudimentary public welfare net, pushed many sectors of the labouring classes to sub-subsistence levels. But as the republican-socialist coalition was never conceived as a revolutionary alliance, outright expropriation or other radically redistributive

²¹ Echoing the republicans' own credo, there was a strong popular belief in the power of the *letter* of the law. Cf. the epigraph to this chapter and n. 1 above.

measures were not considered an option by either of the alliance's component parts.

Indeed, the only area in which the Spanish republicans were prepared to depart from strict fiscal 'rectitude' was education.²² During 1931 they took out special loans to underwrite a target of 27,000 new schoolrooms (and teachers to staff them) in five years. In August 1931 a number of 'teaching missions' (*misiones pedagógicas*) were also established. In the form of literacy classes, mobile libraries, travelling theatre exhibitions and civic education, they brought 'culture and politics' to the villages of Spain. While the project has attracted criticism because of its undeniably paternalist overtones, it did reach people on a significant scale.²³ Indeed, the subsequent conservative administration was worried enough to slash the missions' budget in 1934–5. But the missions' main potential 'public' was labour, and to construct this as a social support base for the progressive Republic required rather more than the delivery of an abstract cultural message – conservative fears notwithstanding. What it demanded was a resolute, coherent and costed policy of practical social reform materially to underpin republican 'enlightenment'.²⁴ As one of the cultural missionaries memorably encapsulated the problem: '[the rural poor] needed bread and medicine, and we had only songs and poems in our bags'.²⁵ But apart from education, the republicans never even saw fit to produce a costing for the reform programme overall, within a formal budget.²⁶

On the other hand, from the start the republicans demonstrated their strong line on law and order. A formative experience for urban labour came with the Barcelona rent strike that erupted in the summer of 1931. The city and its surrounding industrial belt had a uniquely high

²² The ranks of political republicanism contained many teachers and educationalists who were greatly influenced by the ideas of the Institute of Independent Education. They believed that education was the key to modernising Spain.

²³ M. de Puelles Benítez, 'El sistema educativo republicano: un proyecto frustrado', *Historia Contemporánea*, 6 (1991), 159–71.

²⁴ One can argue that a greater awareness of this existed in Spanish socialist ranks – cf. the blueprint for social inclusion and nation building outlined in parliamentary socialist leader Indalecio Prieto's Cuenca speech (May 1936) demanding the 'interior conquest' of Spain. But the same abstraction can also be adduced to criticise parliamentary socialist discourses of popular mobilisation during the war; see chapter 4 below for a discussion of socialist premier Juan Negrín's wartime speeches.

²⁵ C. Cobb in Graham and Labanyi, *Spanish Cultural Studies*, pp. 136–7. The quotation, also cited by Cobb, is the playwright Alejandro Casona's.

²⁶ J. M. Macarro Vera, 'Social and Economic Policies of the Spanish Left in Theory and in Practice', in M. S. Alexander and H. Graham (eds.), *The French and Spanish Popular Fronts. Comparative Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 171–84 and J. M. Macarro, 'Economía y política en el Frente Popular' in *Revista de Historia Contemporánea*, 7 (1996), 129–50. The PSOE's Indalecio Prieto left the treasury for public works in autumn 1931.

concentration of sweated factory labour and urban poor.²⁷ It was this social context of the extreme impoverishment of unskilled labour, plus a housing crisis within a deregulated housing market, which explain the strike.²⁸ It brought down the full force of Republican state discipline on tenants and their leaders.²⁹ They were subject to police harassment and 'preventive detention'. Their meetings were summarily banned, as were worker newspapers that publicised strike-related matters.³⁰ Associative rights were in practice being denied just as they had been under the monarchy. That it was, on this occasion, the Republic's newly formed Assault Guards who were called in to supervise evictions merely reinforced the sense of continuity. The new Republican regime, fearful of losing support among the urban (and especially the commercial) middle classes, justified these measures in the name of the 'authority principle'. It used the new Law for the Defence of the Republic (passed in October 1931) to declare the strike an 'illegal conspiracy' against the regime – thus permitting the intensification of police action.³¹

On numerous notorious occasions across Spain, Republican security forces would clash fatally head-on with protesting workers: at Castilblanco (December 1931), in Arnedo (Logroño) and Llobregat (Barcelona province), both in January 1932, and at Casas Viejas (Andalusia) in January 1933. But beneath these high-profile incidents there lay a daily experience of repression and exclusion.

In Barcelona especially, tensions increased as the republican authorities found themselves unable to deliver promised welfare measures within a severely restricted budget. (Nor of course did the establishment of an autonomous Catalan government in 1932 make much difference here.) The unemployed and others on the economic margins attempted to

²⁷ For an excellent analysis of the material world of unskilled sweated labour which 'made' the Barcelona working class, see Ealham, 'Policing the Recession', chapter 1, pp. 13–50.

²⁸ ILO figures indicate that Spanish workers were the lowest paid in Europe – with the exception of the Portuguese. Yet the Spanish food-price index was higher than in recession-hit Germany, where comparable wages were at least double. *Ibid.*, pp. 142–3.

²⁹ This was before the promulgation of the Catalan statute, so the Madrid government was still in control of public order.

³⁰ The old monarchist eviction law was revised, reducing the period at which eviction could be enforced for rent arrears from 3 months to 8 days. Municipal byelaws were also pressed into service to label flats 'uninhabitable' in order to remove striking tenants. The flats would then be refilled with more pliable tenants, C. Ealham, 'Frustrated Hopes. The 1931 Rent Strike and the Republic' (unpublished article), pp. 13–14. On the rent strike see also N. Rider, 'The Practice of Direct Action: The Barcelona Rent Strike', in D. Goodway (ed.), *For Anarchism. History, Theory, Practice* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 79–105.

³¹ As a result, the rent strike, as a mass action, wound down by the end of 1931. But the failure to resolve any of the desperate conditions that had sparked it meant that it would continue as a sporadic action throughout the life of the Republic: Ealham, 'Frustrated Hopes', pp. 23–4.

find their own solutions, for example by turning to itinerant street trade or setting up *ad hoc* outlets (such as informal street stalls) selling cheap food. But as these undercut established markets and shopkeepers, the authorities, heeding complaints from the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce, sent in the Civil Guard (many of whose agents had served under the monarchy) to arrest or dismantle the competition.³² Pitched battles regularly ensued in the working-class neighbourhoods of Barcelona between the police and the poor – both sellers and customers. There could be no more graphic image of the social war waged between the Republic and its dispossessed.³³ Republican law, once heralded as offering these groups protection and redress, was, in the form of ‘public order’, increasingly becoming a weapon against them. Moreover, the interaction – calculated or otherwise – between public-order measures and the Republic’s new labour legislation was systematically criminalising the most marginal groups of workers.

A key part of the labour legislation steered through under the auspices of the republicans’ socialist coalition partners provided a national network of committees (*Jurados Mixtos*) to settle labour disputes. But such arbitration-based unionism, modelled on the practice of skilled sectors of the UGT, was of little use to Spain’s army of unskilled, casualised and easily replaceable industrial and agrarian labourers. Their lack of bargaining power in the market place (above all in slump conditions) made the direct action tactics spearheaded by the anarcho-sindicalist CNT their only weapon.³⁴ But increasingly it was against these kinds of labour strategies and their implementors that the Republic’s public-order legislation was targeted. The Law for the Defence of the Republic was in force throughout most of the period of republican-socialist government.³⁵ The Law of Employer and Worker Associations (April 1932)³⁶ was used to much the same end. Militants were detained and union

³² The Republic created the Assault Guards as a new urban police force in 1931 and usually held the Civil Guard in reserve for emergencies. But in Barcelona the Civil Guard was retained as the normal policing body. The great continuity of police personnel (at least ‘in the ranks’ if not in positions of responsibility) ensured the perpetuation of authoritarian ideas and a culture of corruption. For policing in Barcelona and the failure of [Republican] professionalisation, see Ealham, ‘Policing the Recession’, pp. 117–22.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 172, 192–3. This was a conflict which would continue unabated into the war years, exacerbated by ever-increasing shortages, inflation and the black market. See chapter 5 below.

³⁴ Although some CNT unions did accept the arbitration system – in spite of opposition from the CNT’s national leadership. See the discussion of divisions in the CNT and CNT–UGT relations later in this chapter.

³⁵ In July 1933 it was replaced by the Public Order Act.

³⁶ *Ley de Asociaciones Profesionales, Patronales y Obreras*; see J. Casanova, *De la calle al frente. El anarcosindicalismo en España (1931–1939)* (Barcelona: Crítica, 1997), p. 55, p. 74, n. 13.

premises closed. In the summer of 1933 an anti-vagrancy law (*Ley de Vagos y Maleantes*) was also introduced.³⁷ This permitted the detention of those who could not prove that they had legal means of supporting themselves. It also outlawed the financial collections on which the CNT's organisation and strategies (especially spontaneous industrial action) depended, and it threatened collectors with internment.³⁸

A test case under the Anti-Vagrancy Act was brought against a number of radical anarchist leaders from the FAI, including Buenaventura Durruti and Francisco Ascaso – neither of whom was unemployed – while they were on a speaking tour of Andalusia in 1933.³⁹ Such legislative harassment more or less obliged anarchist and communist activists – above all in Barcelona – to operate in clandestinity, particularly when they were organising the unemployed. Into this category came street sellers and itinerant workers of all kinds who could also be detained under the conditions of the anti-vagrancy law, in camps established for the purpose.⁴⁰ It was not lost on those so treated that the much-vaunted liberal freedom of association reached no further than skilled sectors of the UGT. Republican law and order was effectively branding non-social democratic constituencies of organised labour, plus anyone else forced for reasons of survival to operate beyond liberal economic nostrums, as ‘enemies of the state’.⁴¹

The republicans would seem to have believed that the mere existence of ‘the Republic’ – or at least the *de jure* declaration of Republican liberties – would serve to pacify economically and politically marginalised sectors. Their constant evocation of ‘the people’ in parliamentary rhetoric

³⁷ This was used as a kind of ‘judicial Hoover’ (Ealham, ‘Policing the Recession’) to ‘regularise’ the detention of all those being held at that time for reasons of perceived ‘undesirable’ behaviour or lifestyle. The law was also retained after the re-election of the liberal left in the Popular Front elections of February 1936.

³⁸ The law specified financial collections by ‘clandestine’ organisations. This was a reference to the CNT's non-registration (prior to 1936) under the April 1932 law: Casanova, *De la calle al frente*, p. 141. The definition of ‘collections’ was also stretched to cover the meagre stipends paid to CNT activists, thus allowing the latter to be targeted also.

³⁹ Ealham, ‘Policing the Recession’, pp. 286–7.

⁴⁰ Some camps were specially established, but a lack of government resources meant that existing prisons (and in Barcelona prison ships) were used: Ealham, ‘Policing the Recession’, pp. 284–91. Most camps were in Barcelona with some in the south. But statistical information and details of camp regimes are sparse. A police report (Madrid interior ministry) refers to 107 individuals being detained in Seville in September 1933. I am grateful to Chris Ealham for this information and for his help with the material in this section.

⁴¹ As discussed later in this chapter, Spanish socialist ethos (whether expressed by trade union leaders or parliamentary socialists) also underwrote the notion of organisable (‘respectable’) and unorganisable (disruptive/lumpen) elements of labour. One of the architects of the anti-vagrancy law was the lawyer and leading parliamentary socialist Luis Jiménez de Asúa.