Introductory Essay

In a broader historical perspective the Spanish Civil War amounts to the opening battle of World War II, where the world began to face Nazism. Viewed internally, on the other hand, the Spanish Civil War was the culmination of a prolonged period of national political unrest—unrest in a country that was increasingly polarized and repeatedly unable to ameliorate the conditions of terrible poverty in which millions of its citizens lived.

Spain Before the War

Spain was a country in which landless peasants cobbled together a bare subsistence living by following the harvests on vast, wealthy agricultural estates. The hierarchy of the Catholic Church, identifying more with wealthy landowners than with the Spanish people, was in full control of secondary education; education for women seemed to them unnecessary and universal literacy a danger rather than a goal. Divorce was illegal. The military, meanwhile, had come to see itself, rather melodramatically, as the only bulwark against civil disorder and as the ultimate guarantor of the core values of Spanish society.

When a leftish, progressive Popular Front government was elected to lead the Republic in February 1936, with the promise of realistic land reform as one of its key planks, conservative forces immediately gathered to plan resistance. The Spanish Left, meanwhile, celebrated the elections in a way that made conservative capitalists, military officers, and churchmen worried that much broader reform might begin. Rumors of plotting for a military coup led leaders of the Republic to transfer several high-ranking military officers to remote postings, the aim being to make communication and coordination between them more difficult. But it was not enough. The planning for a military uprising continued.

The military rebellion took place on July 18, 1936, with the officers who organized it expecting a quick victory and a rapid takeover of the entire country. What the military did not anticipate was the determination of the Spanish people, who broke into barracks, took up arms, and crushed the rebellion in key areas like the cities of Madrid and Barcelona.

It was at that point that the character of the struggle changed, for the military realized they were not going to win easily. Instead they faced a prolonged struggle against their own people and an uncertain outcome. The Spanish military appealed to fascist dictators such as Benito Mussolini in Italy, Adolph Hitler in Germany, and Antonio Salazar in Portugal for assistance, and they soon began receiving both men and supplies.

The 1936 Spanish election had already been widely celebrated as a great victory in progressive publications in Britain, France, and the United States. In the midst of a worldwide depression, the military uprising was thus immediately seen as an assault against working people’s interests everywhere. The rapid intervention of German and Italian troops gave what might otherwise have remained a civil war a dramatic international character.
Almost from the outset, then, the Spanish Civil War became a literal and symbolic instance of the growing worldwide struggle between fascism and democracy. Indeed, the Republic, the elected Popular Front government, perceived the country as being invaded by foreign troops. When Hitler tested his planes the following April on the Basque holy city Guernica and turned the city to rubble, many people throughout the world began to pay more attention to the conflict.

**Women’s Roles in the War**
The expanding war meant that women began to take on new jobs in both the Republican and Nationalist areas. As women began to adopt new public roles, they remained traditional. However, once women were mobilized for the war effort, they became exposed to alternative experiences that changed them and their position in Spanish society.

This process was more rapid and visible in Republican Spain which provided a more conducive environment for women to begin to question established gender roles—especially in the early stages of the war. The most striking example of this was that women went to fight, and sometimes die, at the front. Some women also held positions of command.

In Republican Spain large numbers of proletarian and middle-class women were also incorporated to war tasks—either directly to workshops and factories of the Republican home front, or via the Popular Front organizations which provided a range of health and welfare services geared to the needs of home and military fronts. In both Barcelona and Madrid, women ran much of the public transportation systems. They worked both to replace men in some tasks and also to sustain their families while male breadwinners were absent.

Following the battle of Madrid, Francisco Franco declared victory for the Nationalists from his bed where he was ill with the flu on April 1, 1939. He would go on to rule over Spain until 1975. In Nationalist Spain, there was no such industrial mobilization of women since there was abundant aid from the Axis powers—Germany and Italy. Nevertheless, as health and welfare services devolved to the competence of the Seccion Femenina (SF was the Nationalist women’s organization), increasing numbers of lower middle-class women became involved in providing services that foreshadowed some of the post-war functions of that organization. These tasks were represented via propaganda to the mobilized women as a continuation of women’s traditional duties and pastoral/charitable work. The messages stressed that the exceptional circumstances made women’s presence in public life essential in order to win the battle to re-establish traditional norms and values which would allow them to return to the home.

In fact, however, these circumstances were themselves part of a wider process of socio-economic crisis and change that was gradually altering women’s perceptions of their function. The ambiguities of the SF’s status and activities after Franco’s victory attest to this complex dynamic. It would manifest itself from 1939 onwards as a dual process that shifted the boundaries of public and private: as the state expanded to regulate spaces
previously defined as “private”—such as child care and home management—this required the public-professional mobilization of substantial numbers of women. They were trained as SF cadres who, in a variety of capacities and forums, especially health and education, would provide the gender-specific instruction necessary to bring the state into the home.