

6.32 The Spanish Civil War and Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1936-1939)

Source: Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (ALBA) at <http://www.alba-valb.org/history/spanish-civil-war>

Background: The Spanish Civil War broke out in July 1936, after conservative military officials tried to overthrow a progressive government elected the previous February. Within days the country was split in half, one zone controlled by the government (known as Republicans, Loyalists, or Reds) and the other by the rebels (also referred to as Nationalists, Fascists, or Whites). Three years of bloody fighting followed. General Francisco Franco quickly emerged as the Nationalist commander-in-chief. The main leaders on the Republican side were President Azaña and Prime Ministers Largo Caballero and Negrín. The war ended with a Nationalist victory in April 1939. Franco would rule Spain as a ruthless dictator until his death in 1975.

The war quickly became internationalized. Global public opinion rallied around one of the two factions, seeing the war as either a struggle of democracy against fascism or, conversely, of Christian civilization against Communism. Fearful of escalation, major Western governments signed a Non-Intervention Pact. Franco immediately requested and received extensive military support from Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. The Republic was supported by the USSR and, to a smaller extent, by Mexico. While Germany and Italy used Spain to try out war materials and tactics they would employ in World War II, Western powers refused to stand by the embattled Republic, not even allowing it to buy arms on the international market.

Guernica is a mural-sized oil painting on canvas by Spanish artist Pablo Picasso. It was completed in June 1937 while he was living in Paris. It is over 11 feet high and 25 feet wide. Picasso painted the mural in response to the bombing of the Basque village of Guernica in northern Spain by German and Italian warplanes in support of Spanish fascist forces. The bombing foreshadowed German attacks on civilian populations during World War II.

Directions: Choose two of the central figures of the painting and write a paragraph explaining your interpretation of their inclusion in the piece. Explain what you believe Picasso was trying to convey through these images, and why you think the sections you chose are perhaps the most striking.

