

## Historical background: Spain

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### **Spain in the 20th century**

Although Spain did not participate in any of the world wars that shook the European continent during the twentieth century, its history did not occur outside of the European dynamic, and it was not alien to the deep social, economic, political and cultural transformations that swept through Europe during the 20th century. In 1900, Spain was a declining old empire, which had lost its last American colonies and had been dragged down by structural problems that would persist throughout the century. The majority of Spaniards remained outside the political game and many saw themselves forced to cross the Atlantic to win the bread that they were losing in their original home. Spain was a country of emigrants, the persecuted and the banished. The loss of the colonies had discredited the political model of the Bourbon Restoration, evidencing the political, economic, and social chaos suffered by the country. However, under the reign of king Alfonso XIII, political continuity was imposed. Institutional reforms were postponed indefinitely, and Spain embarked on a new expansionist company with the taking of Morocco, thus feeding social agitation in the metropolis. General Miguel Primo de Rivera's coup d'etat, which occurred on September 13, 1923, was an attempt by the military to reestablish order. As a dictator, Primo de Rivera imposed a totalitarian government, thus displacing political freedoms and suppressing the rule of law for more than six years, and ultimately causing his own government's dissolution. The call for free elections in 1931, and the victory of the Republican-Socialist coalition in urban areas led to the establishment of the Second Republic. The new democratic regime, intended to transform the country from top to bottom. A first reforming stage, known as the First Biennium (1931-1933), during which the Republican-Socialist coalition carried out numerous reforms, followed a stage governed by the right-wing, which sought to rectify the reforms of the former. This second stage would lead to another, born from the electoral triumph of the left-wing coalition in the February 1936 elections. This government, however, would only last five months because of the military coup on July 18 of the same year that would lead to the Spanish Civil War.

The rebel troops of General Francisco Franco were supported by Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. Because of this, as well as the policy of non-intervention of Western democracies, his troops were victorious on April 1 1939, establishing a new dictatorial regime that would last for 40 years. The implementation of a strong repression on the part of the defeated pushed hundreds of thousands of Spaniards into exile and meant, for others, death or imprisonment. Others lived an interior exile imposed by silence and the struggle for survival. At the end of World War II, Spain's support for the Axis powers led the country to international isolation, but not for too long. The cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as the belligerent anticommunism of the Franco regime, made Spain present to the Western powers.

Franco's death on November 20, 1975, accelerated the democratic transition process. Two years later the law for political reform was approved for the Francoist Courts, which led to democratic elections. In 1978, the Spanish Constitution was implemented, establishing a social and democratic state of law with the parliamentary monarchy as a form of government.

## Jewish history of Spain

Spain's expulsion of the Jews in the year 1492 requires a different historical approach in relation to its European neighbors. The *de facto* absence of Jews in Spain from the 15th to the 19th centuries means, for example, that antisemitism in the country cannot be explained simply by the conflict between the Christian majority and the Jewish minority; the phenomenon should rather be understood as an example of "antisemitism without Jews". This fact has marked the relationship between Spanish Jews and non-Jews during the 20th century.

Small numbers of Jews started to re-settle in Spain in the 19th century. From then, a newly-built Jewish community began to establish on Spanish soil. In 1918, because of a first immigration wave of Sephardic Jews from the Ottoman Empire, synagogues were reopened in Barcelona and Madrid. Another immigration wave of Jewish people from Ashkenazi backgrounds took place from the advent of Nazism in Germany in January 1933 until the beginning of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). During the Civil War, a number of Jews from all over the world came to Spain to fight against Franco's Nationalist troops. The Spanish Civil War can be seen as a first act of Jewish resistance against fascism. On 28 March 1939, General Franco's troops entered Madrid, thus ending the war. Without the active support of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, Franco would not have won the war, and, feeling beholden to their allies, Franco's regime compiled a register of Jews resident in Spain and added Jewish identity to its official identity documents. Other pre-existing anti-Jewish measures remained in force.

When the Second World War was nearing its end, the Franco regime began to cultivate the idea that it had acted to protect Jews across Europe to improve diplomatic relations with the former Allied powers as the winners of World War II. The legend by which the Francoist government claimed to have saved the lives of thousands of European Jews from the Holocaust had already begun - the myth as the result of a decades-long propaganda campaign initiated by Franco's government toward the end of World War II.