Paul Davy, *Political Violence in the Second Spanish Republic*

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April 1931 was a momentous month in Spain. Amid political and economic turmoil republican parties won a landslide victory in the elections on April 12th. The elections were seen as a plebiscite on Spain's monarchy and the Second Spanish Republic was proclaimed two days later.[1] King Alfonso XIII, who had ruled Spain since his birth in May 1886, went into exile.[2] The proclamation of the Republic was greeted with jubilation by many, for the demise of the monarchy was seen as a chance to create a much fairer Spain, free from inequality and discrimination. Others were appalled – they feared losing their social, economic, and political control of the country.[3] The following five years were marked by increasing political violence between the left and right and in July 1936 sections of the military and their right-wing supporters launched a coup to, as they claimed, save Spain from anarchy.[4] The uprising caused a three-year civil war and following the right wing's victory, a thirty-six-year-long military dictatorship headed by General Franco. Understanding the political violence which marred the Second Spanish Republic is important because of the role it may have played in

[1] The First Spanish Republic lasted twenty-two months between February 1873 and December 1874.

[2] Hugh Thomas, The Spanish Civil War (London: Penguin, 2003), 31.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), 18.

creating the conditions required for the July 1936 military uprising. Furthermore, seeking to explain why people employ violence for political purposes and how violence occurs is important for other reasons, not least because it can help in tackling this issue. The is particularly relevant now with society becoming more polarised and political violence and violent discourse increasing.[5]

This essay analyses a riot that took place near Seville in 1935. It explores the logic behind this conflict and examines why those involved participated in activities which caused serious injuries and deaths and how the violence occurred. It argues that although violence is by its very nature destructive, it can also play a constructive role, as the activists derived benefits from their violent activities.

Aznalcóllar, April 1935

Our case study relates to violent altercations that occurred in Aznalcóllar, a small town located approximately twenty miles north-west of Seville, on 29 and 30 April 1935. There is extensive press coverage of the incidents which is supplemented by court records and other primary evidence.

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[5] For example, a survey published by researchers from Cardiff University and the University of Edinburgh in October 2019 highlighted that a majority of Leave and Remain voters in England, Scotland and Wales believed violence against MPs and violent protests in which members of the public are badly injured are a "price worth paying" for their goals to be achieved https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/1709008-future-of-england-survey-reveals-public-attitudes-towards-brexit-and-the-union

Ahora is one of the most detailed sources of journalistic reporting about the incident.[6] The newspaper states that:

'The origin of the events was the sale by fascists of the newspaper called "Arriba", which sadly led to one death and four people being wounded. On Monday [29 April 1935] five individuals arrived by car in Aznalcóllar with the intention of selling [this] newspaper. Their presence and behaviour caused a great deal of disgust among the locals. One resident asked them to cease their propaganda, but they took no notice. A large group of locals went to the edge of town and when the fascists were about to leave the locals shouted insults at them. The fascists left, saying that they would come back better prepared'.[7]

This promise was kept. We learn from *Ahora*'s reporting that the next day:

'Around 20 fascists arrived [in Aznalcóllar] in three cars. Their presence was considered a provocation. Some locals and the mayor told them to leave but they refused, and the locals started shouting and cursing at them. The fascists withdrew to their cars, and it appears at this point the fascists were attacked, with people throwing stones at them. One of the fascists fired shots at the locals, four of whom were injured. The rest of the locals fled in a panic, throwing stones at the fascists. The person who started the shooting got closer to those who were fleeing, chasing, and shooting at them, and when he was going back to his car, he was hit by a shot fired by one of his companions, as a result he was seriously injured…He died shortly after being admitted [to

[6] *Ahora* was a centrist newspaper which was published between 1930 and 1939.

[7] *Ahora*, 02/05/1935.

hospital]. The deceased was called Manuel Pérez Minguez (sic) and he was 32 years old'.[8]

The subsequent edition of *Ahora* states that one of the locals injured in the incident had subsequently died, bringing the total number of deaths to two.[9]

The trial took place on 5 October 1935, the records for which are held in the Seville's *Archivo Histórico Provincial*, the regional archive.[10] Thirteen people were tried for murder and attempted murder. The accused were all male activists from the Seville branch of the Falange Española,[11] the oldest of whom was thirty-six and the youngest nineteen. The youngest four were students, aged between nineteen and twenty-three. The rest were aged over twenty-six and held working-class jobs, for example, one was a mechanic, one a construction worker and another a debt collector. The marital status is provided for eleven of the accused and all but two of them were unmarried. All the students were unmarried, which is not surprising given their ages and the fact they were not in paid employment, but it is interesting to note that most of the workers were unmarried despite being of an age where this might be expected. Most of the accused were from Seville or nearby towns, suggesting they were likely a close-knit group or at least well acquainted with one another. This sense of connection is reinforced by the fact that

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 03/05/1935.

[10] Archivo Histórico Provincial de Sevilla, libro de sentencia del año 1935, sentencia n. 16, rollo 1459, causa n. 55.

[11] The Falange Española was a fascist political party created in 1934. Although it struggled to make electoral headway during the Second Republic, in 1937 General Franco, self-proclaimed head of state, merged it with a monarchist movement and the subsequent organisation formed the sole political party during his dictatorship.

approximately a third of those on trial were also arrested after the Falange provoked another riot in April 1934 during celebrations to mark the anniversary of the declaration of the Second Republic.[12] This suggests that participation in violent disturbances was creating solidarities between those involved.

The court records describe the incident in detail. They state that a smaller group than the accused went to Aznalcóllar on 29 April to sell *Arriba*. The locals forced the group to leave, who threw stones at them and shouted, ‘get away from here outsiders’. This caused the accused to return the following day to again try to sell their newspaper and shout slogans. This time they arrived in three taxis. The taxis waited outside the town while the activists entered it, spreading out in groups throughout the main street of the town, shouting to (ostensibly) sell their newspaper. This caused a large group of hostile locals to congregate and object to the behaviour of the fascists. The arraigned claimed they were entitled to sell their newspaper but due to the threat of public disorder the local government official asked them to cease their activities. The temperature rose further with the locals shouting ‘get out fascists’ and throwing stones at the interlopers. Four of the accused fired their weapons at the locals, killing one and injuring four others. The accused then retreated, heading back to the vehicles in an orderly fashion, while being pursued by groups of locals. Some of the locals threw stones at the accused while others fled in a terrified manner, taking refuge in nearby houses and streets. The court records state that a Falange member Manuel García Miguez was killed but it was not possible to establish who was responsible for this

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[12] *El Liberal*, 15/04/1934. *El Liberal* took a republican stance during the Second Republic.

death. Sentences were handed down for unauthorised possession of firearms, violent disorder and homicide and injuries caused in a violent disorder.

Both *ABC* and *El Liberal* provide further information on the court case. The report in *El Liberal* is short and covers only the first part of the trial. It has not been possible to find *El Liberal*'s coverage for the second half. *El Liberal* outlines the defence put forward by the accused, namely that they had gone to Aznalcóllar to sell their newspaper, were told by local police that they required permission from the mayor and that when they went to speak to this official, locals threw stones at them. When they tried to leave shots were fired leading to the death of Miguez. Interestingly, one of the lawyers representing the accused was none other than José Antonio Primo de Rivera, the head of Falange.[13] *ABC* provides more detail,[14] starting with the defence case as outlined in *El Liberal* but also stating that the defendants were merely exercising their constitutional rights by attempting to sell their newspaper in the town. *ABC* primarily focuses on the defence case, and when the opposing case is discussed, the newspaper claims the prosecution witnesses contradicted themselves. Readers of *ABC* would have been confused and angry to read the court's decision. Four of the accused, including Martín Ruiz Arenado, the leader of the group, were convicted of committing manslaughter during a violent disorder and sentenced to two years, four months and one day in prison. They were also found guilty of grievous bodily harm, for which they received the sentence of two months and a day, and actual bodily harm, for which they were sentenced to 10 days imprisonment. Two of these

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[13] *El Liberal*, 05/10/1935.

[14] *ABC*, 05/10/1935. *ABC* took a right-wing monarchist line during the Second Republic.

defendants were also sentenced to two years, 11 months, and 11 days in prison for the illegal possession of firearms. The rest of the accused were found not guilty.

In terms of the sociological drivers behind the violence, it is interesting to compare this incident with similar events in Germany. In *Stormtroopers*, a history of the Nazi Party's SA, Daniel Siemens describes a violent incident that occurred in Bad Tölz, a town in Bavaria near Munich, in 1922.[15] According to police records, on a Sunday lunchtime in mid-August a group of eighteen Nazi party members arrived in this spa town. They occupied the city centre by hanging a banner from an inn and shortly afterwards paraded through the city centre singing patriotic songs. The parades continued, and this, in combination with anti-Semitic songs, provoked a violent reaction from the locals. The interlopers were attacked with the only weapons the locals had at their disposal, hiking sticks. The local police had to intervene and compel the Nazi expedition to go home. According to the group leader these outings took place nearly every weekend and public holiday during the summer of 1922. There are interesting similarities between the Bad Tölz and the Aznalcóllar incidents. Both involved 'expeditions' from the activists' bases to physically occupy the centres of nearby smaller towns. Both incidents involved the activists engaging in shouting, the Nazis sang their nationalistic songs, while the Falange had their own patriotic calls and attempts to publicise their newspaper. This behaviour generated solidarity within the groups; it bonded the participants together, created a sense of fun and excitement and built

[15] Daniel Siemens, *Stormtroopers: A new history of Hitler's Brownshirts* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 15.

courage. It was also intended to provoke a violent reaction. The Nazis went to a pub owned by one of the city's Jewish residents to sing anti-Semitic songs and the Falange members knew they were not welcome in Aznalcóllar, they had after all been forced out of the town the day before the killings took place. The Falange likely knew their outings would create a violent reaction from the locals; in fact, they wanted this to happen. The judicial records related to the incident contain a letter written by Martín Ruiz to a friend in April 1934 which is very illuminating in this respect.[16] In the letter Ruiz states:

'There is no other solution but to show your face and run risks. We are the blood heirs of the [conquistadors]. We should give our lives if it is necessary. The balls you have between your legs should be used for more than just hanging there. We will rise up and every night we will beat the Marxist scum with sticks. Our headquarters is covered with slogans: "Long Live Fascism", "Death to the Marxist pigs" etc. etc.'

The Aznalcóllar expedition was therefore a deliberate, pre-meditated attempt to provoke violence.

Siemens writes that the SA's behaviour in Bad Tölz contains "several characteristics of what sociological research calls the 'expressive acting of violence' defined as violence that is seen as an end in itself".[17] Politics were present in both incidents, as we have seen from the newspaper reporting and judicial records the Falange ostensibly went to publicise their newspaper

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[16] Archivo general de la Jefatura Superior de Policía de Andalucía Comisaría de Investigación y Vigilancia, documentación de Falange Española", carpetilla "Documentos varios de Falange Española", legajo L, expediente 5.

[17] Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 15.

vocally, the SA sang anti-Semitic songs, but what was more important was the sense of confrontation, the opportunity to express masculinity by engaging in provocative behaviour and the experience of collective entertainment.

We have seen above that the participants were all young men, the average age of the Aznalcóllar group was twenty-seven and most of the group were unmarried students and blue-collar workers. There are interesting comparisons with an SA group studied by Sven Reichardt.[18] The average age of the group Reichardt studied is similar, in this case twenty-five.[19] Reichardt highlights that most of the Sturm were too young to have fought in World War I, demonstrating that individuals did not need to have been brutalised by their participation in this conflict to take part in political violence. The Falange group did not participate in World War I, they were also too young and Spain did not take part in the conflict, which reinforces Reichardt's argument that we must look deeper than brutalisation to explain political violence in the inter-war period. Reichardt argues that violent male camaraderie provided emotional communalisation and a type of replacement family.[20] The Aznalcóllar group shared similar backgrounds, they were young mostly unmarried males with working-class jobs who were also living through economically difficult times. Violent male camaraderie provided emotional support and entertainment in these testing circumstances.

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[18] Sven Reichardt, "Violence and Community: A Micro-Study on Nazi Storm Troopers" in Central European History 46 (2013) No. 2, 275-297.

[19] Reichardt, "Violence and Community", 286.

[20] Reichardt, "Violence and Community", 292.

The concepts of emotional communalisation and replacement families are also seen in the commemorations which took place to celebrate the sacrifices made by these activists. On 20 October 1935 José Antonio Primo de Rivera, the head of the Falange, signed a resolution relating to the organisation in Seville and Andalucía. It states that Miguez 'died gloriously in Aznalcóllar on 29 April in service to the Falange, he was always at the front line, demonstrating his brave and happy spirit'.[21] Miguez was awarded the 'silver palm' for his glorious death in service to the Falange, with Sancho Dávila, the local leader, and Martín Ruiz receiving the same decoration. The resolution also lauds Adrián Irusta who was injured in Aznalcóllar; Irusta is decorated with both the white and the red cross by the Falange leader. These awards provided a reward and incentive for members to participate in violent activism. Furthermore, by commemorating fallen comrades the decorations also bonded together the group's members and encouraged the activists to avenge the deaths and injuries suffered.

This case study also demonstrates aspects of the micro-sociological theory of violence put forward by Randall Collins in *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory*.[22] Collins analyses violent situations, rather than individuals, and argues that violence is harder to perform than most people believe because tension and fear usually prevent it from taking place. He also argues that, sociologically, humans prefer solidarity to confrontation.[23]

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[21] Sancho Dávila and Julián Pemartin, *Hacia la historia de la Falange* (Cádiz: Jerez Industrial, 1938), p.134-136.

[22] Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[23] Ibid., p.27.

Collins believes a set of pathways need to be overcome for violence to take place. One of these pathways is 'fun and entertainment' and we have already discussed how Aznalcóllar incidents were a source of entertainment for those involved. Other aspects of the incident also conform to Collins' pathways. One of these is 'forward panic', i.e., violence erupts when one of the sides gains an advantage. Interestingly, according to *Ahora* the locals escalated their attack precisely when the fascist activists were withdrawing. Collins highlights numerical advantage as an important factor in forward panics and although the reporting is confused, the locals do appear to have had a considerable numerical advantage at this point. Another pathway discussed by Collins is the strong attacking the weak,[24] and in this incident, we see the fascists retaliating with firearms to being attacked by stones, a disproportionate response. Collins also discusses how violent incidents are more confused than the media portrays,[25] which we see in this incident, as it appears that Miguez was killed by his own side. Another factor Collins discusses is how crowds consist of different segments, the actively violent, support clusters and the less involved.[26] In Aznalcóllar while some of the locals pursued the fascists, others fled and hid in nearby streets and houses. Finally, Collins discusses the role of the crowd in encouraging violence,[27] and again we see here how the crowd of locals chanted at their interlopers, generating the necessary emotional energy for a section of the group to launch their attack.

[24] Collins, *Violence*, 40.

[25] Ibid., 60-61.

[26] Ibid., 429.

[27] Ibid., 129.

Conclusion

This case study has enabled us to explore the sociological reasons for political violence during the Second Spanish Republic. We have seen that although violence is inherently destructive, two people lost their lives during the incident and others were injured, violence could also play a generative role. For example, the instigators of these incidents derived a sense of solidarity and emotional communalisation from their participation in the disturbances, reinforcing a spirit of camaraderie that had been created through involvement in previous violent altercations. This sense of belonging and community was important because of the disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds of many of the activists and the testing times in which they lived. The violent activities also provided a sense of fun and entertainment for those involved. Furthermore, violence led to more violence; the commemoration of fallen comrades further strengthened the bonds between those involved and other members of the wider group and encouraged the activists to seek further opportunities to avenge the colleagues they had lost. Also, it is interesting to note the striking similarities between the motivations for political violence in contemporary Spain and Germany, particularly as political violence in Spain has arguably received less historical attention than other parts of Europe in the same period. In fact, these motivations do not appear to be unique to 1930s Spain and Germany, they also surely provide an insight into the drivers behind political violence much more widely.

The case study also allowed us to test pathways that need to be overcome for violence to take place, for example, the Aznalcóllar disturbances provide an example of the concept of 'forward panic', and they

also demonstrate the confused nature of violent incidents, the segmentation of those involved and the role of the crowd in encouraging violence. It is from here that we can perhaps take encouragement. If hurdles must be overcome for violence to take place, then a better understanding of these pathways, and the motivations of those involved, will surely provide opportunities for managing and reducing violent conflicts.

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