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La Guerra Civil Española y sus Trece Rosas: The Spanish Civil War and Their  
Thirteen Roses

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## **Introduction:**

La Guerra Civil – The Spanish Civil. A long, bloody three years in Spain that claimed countless lives and left an ugly and lasting mark on the country and in the hearts of the people. However, for the rest of the world, there is little known or little talked about regarding this political battle that divided a nation. Having taken Spanish for five years before coming to college, I knew I immediately wanted to pursue a major when I arrived at Duquesne and learn more about the language and all it encompasses. During my sophomore year I decided to study abroad in Salamanca, Spain and from January to May, I lived with a wonderful host family.

My host mom was very friendly and from the moment we met, the conversation never lulled. I learned that her last name was Gil-Franco and immediately I had the thought “*wouldn’t it be crazy if she were related to Francisco Franco?*” Francisco Franco was the dictator of Spain from 1936-1975 and a key player in the Spanish Civil War. A few months into my stay in Spain, I learned that my host mom was, in fact, related to Franco and was actually his niece. This would explain her very conservative political views and her strong feelings regarding Spanish politics. Many times at lunch, she and I would engage in discussions and she would always tell me “Rachel, you are a Republican” and (before realizing that the term “Republican” in Spain signifies someone who is more liberal) we would discuss our very different takes on politics. I held this piece of information close to me, often thinking about it in class when we would discuss the War.

In particular, I took a class called “Women Throughout Contemporary Spanish History” and we ended the class talking about Las Trece Rosas – thirteen, young Spanish women who, during the Spanish Civil, fought for the beliefs and were consequently killed for their actions. We then watched a powerful and mostly fact-based film about their lives called “Las Trece Rosas”. I had never heard of their story before and excitedly went home to talk to my host mom about it – feeling sure that she would have an opinion on them. To my surprise she knew nothing about

“Las Trece Rosas.” As we talked about them, we were both deeply impacted by the story. It seemed that it was a story that could unite two very different politically minded women and I returned to the United States eager to pursue research on the topic, one that not many people (including Spaniards) were familiar with. To understand Las Trece Rosas and what they were fighting against, it is crucial to understand the Spanish Civil War. It is complicated, filled with different key players and parties and was a result of various instances that contributed to it starting in 1931.

### **The Spanish Civil War: Background**

After the Spanish monarchy was abolished in 1931 and King Alfonso XIII abdicated the throne, Spain was left in the hands of the socialist **Republican Party**. During this time, the **Second Republic** was established. With the onset of the Great Depression, **anti-fascist and socialist ideals** were gaining power and the Second Republic was supported by the middle and working class who were in favor of church-state separation and creating a **more liberal, reform-minded Spain**. The country was divided with the right opposing these ideals. Hopes of peace in Spain were dashed as the country struggled to unify and faced severe economic problems. The working class was growing frustrated and in the 1936 election, the united left-leaning groups known as **Popular Front** was elected. In an attempt to maintain power, they Popular Front banded the **Falange**. However, soon the **Nationalists** rebelled. One of the Nationalist, a General named **Francisco Franco**, led a rebellion in the Spanish-controlled area of Morocco and a few short months later other countries would pledge their support to one side or the other.

Support for the right-leaning Franco-led Nationalists came from people like Adolf Hitler, while the left got support in the form of the International Brigade (supporters of Communism, Socialism, and Liberalism who were mainly French and American). Franco and his supporters gained by power and he became the leader of Spain, but the struggle was not over. Countries like Italy and Germany recognized Franco's power and supported him, but nevertheless

the country was divided. As the Nationalists struggled to gain control, across Spain the left-leaning Republicans rebelled and were punished gravely. Las Treces Rosas were a part of this uprising and paid with their lives on August, 5<sup>th</sup> 1939 in what is known as the **Saco de Agosto** during which Nationalist executed 56 “rebels” (the 13 Roses and 43 men) (*Spanish Civil War*, Berdichevsky, Carr, Hendricks, “Las,” Payne, “Timeline”).

### **Las Trece Rosas: Who Were They?**

Admired by the peers for their bravery, even when facing death, they were nicknamed the Thirteen Roses. What is shocking is that many of the women were under majority age in Spain, their youth snuffed out right before them. Before being imprisoned, the women were responsible for spreading leftist propaganda and generating funds and support for *The Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas* (The United Socialist Youth) of which they were all members. After being arrested, the women were separated into two prisons (a youth prison and an adult prison). The conditions they faced in prison were grave. The prisons were largely overpopulated and illness, hunger, and deprivation prevailed. Las Trece Rosas were daughters, sisters, and even wives. They were fearless and they were leaders in the movement against fascism.

The first rose was Carmen Barrero Aguado who was from Madrid. In 1936 she joined the Unified Socialist Youth and she would die at the age of 24, along with her brothers were also killed for “rebellious.” The second rose was Martina Barroso who was from the Charmartín region of Madrid and worked as a dressmaker before joining the Socialist movement. After she was arrested, she was placed in the juvenile jail despite being 22. The third rose was Blanca Brissac Vázquez who was from the San Sebastián region of Spain. Her husband was also involved in the movement and died the same day as her. Blanca died at the age of 29 and it was said that the first shot did not kill her. The fourth rose was Pilar Bueno Ibáñez who was from the Northern Madrid sector of the resistance and worked as a seamstress, volunteering her services to the movement when the War started. She died at the age of 26.

The fifth rose was Julia Conesa Conesa who was only 19 when she died. In prison she wrote a letter to her mom that reads *“Mother, little mother, I’m going to meet my sister and dad in the next world, but keep in mind that I die for an honorable person. Goodbye, dear mother, goodbye forever. Your daughter who can never kiss or hug you anymore. Do not cry. May my name not be erased from history.”*

The sixth rose was Adelina García, who was also a seamstress and joined the resistance right away when the War broke out. Her role of distributing propaganda and resistance materials during the War was crucial to the Socialist movement and when she was arrested she was sent to the adult prison (even though she was not of age) and would die at 19. The seventh rose was Elena Gil Olaya who was from the Murcia region of Spain and an original member of the resistance. She would later move to Madrid to join the movement in the Chamartín region. Although she was only 20 years old when she died, she spent her final days in the adult prison. The eighth rose was Virtudes González García. She was a secretary of her local resistance movement, then promoted to a position in the regional section. She had recently married her husband, Valentín Ollero, before being sent to the adult prison. At the age of 19, she died the same day as him, just hours after he was shot.

The ninth rose was Ana López Gallego who was from Tetuán, Spain. She completed six years of schooling before getting cut from the National School of Catillejos. She was sent to the juvenile prison for her role in fighting in the resistance and being a secretary of Radio in Chamartín and died at the age of 21. The tenth rose was Joaquina López Laffite. Originally from Asturias, where her father served as a commander of the army before his death, she moved to Madrid and eventually was named the leader of the Propaganda and Agitation Committee. She was placed in charge of raising money for the resistance. She and her brothers were arrested and placed in prison and she died at the age of 23.

The eleventh rose was Dionisia Manzanero Salas. She was originally from Madrid and raised by a father who was also a part of the resistance (The Unión General de Trabajadores -

General Union of Workers). She played many roles in the War and fought alongside her friend, Pilar Bueno Ibáñez. She eventually worked in the Chamartín region of the Madrid resistance as a typewriter before being imprisoned. Some of her final words, written at the age of 20 in a letter to her family, were:

*"Dearest parents and brothers. I want at this moment so distressing for me to be able to send you the last letters so that throughout your life you remember your daughter and sister, although I do not think I should do it, but the circumstances of life require it. As you have seen through my judgment, the prosecutor sees me as a being unworthy to be in the society of the National Unionist Revolution. But do not rush, keep the serenity and firmness until the last moment, do not drown your tears, I do not tremble my hand when writing. I am calm and firm until the last moment. But keep in mind that I do not die for a criminal or a thief, but for an idea...Many kisses and hugs of your daughter and sister, who dies innocent."*

The twelfth rose was Victoria Muñoz García. Originally from Madrid, she joined the resistance early on. Eventually she became a part of the Chamartín section of the resistance in Madrid and was placed in charge of the "military" section before being jailed at age 18. Both she and her brothers suffered for the movement and as a result died for their beliefs. The thirteenth rose was Luisa Rodríguez de la Fuente who was originally from the Chamartín area of Madrid. She worked as a dressmaker before joining the resistance. Her arrest came as the result of being turned in by a friend who was also working as a police officer and she died at the age of 18. (Egido León, "Carmen," Carr, Ferrero).

These thirteen names belonged to young women who used all of their might to fight a regime they deemed unjust. In this fight, they risk (and ultimately lost) everything – their family name, their reputation, and their lives. They fought for women's rights (such as education and the right to work) and did not back down, not even when faced with the realization that their lives were at stake. Virtudes Gonzalez explained her reason for fighting saying (transl.) "It is better to

die on one's feet, than to live on one's knees" (Carceller). Indeed, Las Trece Rosas remained active and planned ambitious rebellions, rather than come to terms with the injustice that faced them. One of their plans was to create a Communist-minded political party. Although the word "Communist" carries a lot of weight, what the women were really advocating was gender equality. Keeping in mind that the Spain they knew was very much "machismo" (male-minded), the women were really advocating for equality for all.

As Carmen Barrero Aguado put it, (transl.) "Create a great female organization." She, and the other women, advocated for a government that would bring prosperity to all Spaniards, many of whom they saw facing poverty and hardships. Even though the women knew they that had lost the war, they did not give up and hoped for a day when "the new leader had to be shown that even though they had lost the war, the Communists would not give up...they were there to prove it." This strength and desire to change one's social situations that is deemed unjust did and will continue to inspire generations to come. In the years following Franco's power, Spain changed dramatically. The Spain we know today is far different from the Spain of the past. (Ferrero, Larson)

### **Changes in Spanish Society**

After the fall of the Spanish monarchy in 1931, Spain went under a series of changes. Under the rule of pre-Franco leader, Manuel Azaña, free public education was introduced. Before this, the Catholic Church was in charge of schooling and there was a large percentage of illiteracy. Beyond education, there were reforms made to marriage laws as well. Divorce was legalized, along with civil marriages. Women were given the right to vote and illiteracy in the popular decreased. However, the right, Nationalist side saw these reforms as a threat to traditional Spain and when General Franco took control in 1939, Spain changed dramatically – again.

### **The Franco Years**

For almost 40 years, from 1939 to 1975, Spain became "traditional." (Sacchi). There was no longer separation of Church and State, the right to divorce and have civil marriages was taken



away, and women were told their place was to stay at home and have children. In what is known as “female domesticity” women were to serve God and their country by reproducing patriotic-minded children and teaching them the traditional values of the Church and Spain. Work and freedom outside the home was discouraged but – if for economic reasons – it was necessary, their options were limited to jobs suitable for women such as teaching and nursing. The Spain that Las Trece Rosas had fought so hard against was in full force, powering full steam ahead to turn Spain into a “backwards” country rooted in militarism and misogyny. (Lannon, Frances). However, after Franco’s death in 1975 Spain changed again and has slowly become the country it is today – a progressive country with many advancements.

### **Spain Today**

Today, the unemployment rate for women is below the European Union average, along with the rate of secondary education for women. A reported 36% of women hold management positions, which is also above the EU average of 33%. The gender pay gap is roughly 16.2%, just slightly under the EU’s 16.4% and is still a problem that needs to be addressed (Euronews). Many women work outside of the home and are active in society and politics. During José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero’s leadership women made up half or more of his cabinet. (Tremlett, Giles) In 2015, roughly 40% of Spain’s lower parliament was women. Women in Spain have the right to abortions and feminist groups, such as Alicante, are prevalent. Today, women make up almost half the major parties in Spain, which is a far cry from their role in government 40 years ago. (Jones, Jessica).

Spain is still divided, especially by the rightist party “Partido Popular” and the leftist party “PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español – Spanish Socialist Workers Party). Interestingly, the symbol of the PSOE is a rose – something Las Trece Rosas would probably find pleasing. The fight for justice is not over, but Spain has come a long way. The things Las Trece Rosas fought for are still relevant in Spain and in the world. Their courage and bravery transcends

their death and, if told, can inspire many young women to fight their fight today in hopes of a better tomorrow.

**Plans for the Future:**

I am planning to do interviews with various women living in Spain through the connections I made while I was there, along with the help of Dr. Lucia Osa-Melero. The interviews will be conducted amongst different generations of women to get their take on Las Trece Rosas, the Spanish Civil War, and the Spain of today. I will focus my questions on gender-minded politics and feminism. I also hope to discover what is known about Las Trece Rosas through these interviews and by doing more research in general. From this work, I plan to take a more in-depth look at women's role in Spain during the last century and how it has evolved.

**Limitations:**

Because much of Las Trece Rosas' history happened so long ago, there is a lack of documentation for the women and gaps in their stories. There is still a lot of information about the women that needs to be uncovered. Because I am not in Spain, it can also be more difficult to obtain information about the women. Finally, when conducting the future interview, it is possible that different women will have biases that will affect their responses. However, I hope to do the best research possible and look forward to seeing where my project goes in the future.

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