

ORIGINS OF THE GUARDIA CIVIL

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Spain's Civil Guard was founded 175 years ago, during a century marked by conflict and instability. Since then it has played a major role in the country's biggest crises and tragic conflicts

During the early 19th century, Spain found itself in a desperate War of Independence against Napoleonic France (1808-1814). But while this should have produced a broad sentiment of national unity, the reality was the exact opposite. When the French intervened once again in the Spanish political process less than ten years later, putting an end to the 'Liberal Triennium' (1820-1823) and restoring King Fernando VII, along with his absolutist prerogatives, the divisions within the royalist camp and among the liberals deepened the divide between political loyalties.

The conservative branch of Spanish liberalism, the Moderates, took power in December 1843. They set out to resolve these problems through the establishment of strong central bodies and a strict control of the political and governing process. One of the key institutions needed to achieve these goals was a national police force. Given the nature of the political situation in Spain, this would have to be a centralised one.

This was a time of fighting between liberal and conservative factions, on the battlefield as well as in the no-man's-land of the countryside, a place infested with bandits and guerrillas. Spain was engaged in a dynastic struggle, with loyalists of Queen Isabel II pitted against supporters of Don Carlos, the rival claimant to the throne. This sparked decades of intermittent warfare, lasting until 1876.

Order out of chaos

With the armed forces stretched to the limit in those turbulent years, the government sought ways to alleviate the troops of their policing duties, which included pursuing common criminals, bandits, guerrillas and smugglers. A decree issued by the Ministry of War in December 1843 criticised in rather picturesque terms the armed forces' "occupation in pursuing

thieves and all species of evil-doers ... making it impossible for them to attend to their military duties". The government was split on whether to put together a corps based on the British police force, the system favoured by the liberals, or the Napoleonic model of a gendarmerie, loosely linked to the army. In the end the conservative faction won the day and the Civil Guard was founded as "a public force under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior, created to relieve the troops of these (non-military) duties and to take charge of townships, highways and remaining territory of the peninsula".

The Civil Guard came into being in March 1844, giving Spain its first elite unit directly responsible to the civilian authorities. From the outset, the plan was for the government to take charge of the new force, hence the name Civil Guard. With its distinctive olive-green uniform and patent leather forage cap, the new corps was independent of the army, to the point that any military officer joining the Civil Guard was barred from returning to active service in the armed forces.

The man approached to organise the new unit was Field Marshal Francisco Javier Girón y Ezpeleta, the Duke of Ahumada, who at the time was serving as Inspector-General of the army. Girón became the Civil Guard's first commanding officer, with the deliberately non-military rank of Director General. The appointment was the initiative of Spain's progressive Prime Minister Luis González Bravo, one of the few politicians to remain steadfastly loyal to Queen Isabel II throughout her reign. Girón was a native of Pamplona, a hotbed of insurrectionists hostile to the monarch. After being promoted to Brigadier, he took part in two of the three wars fought between pro-Isabel troops and supporters of the pretender Don Carlos.

The country that Isabel II inherited from her father Fernando VII was an impoverished land, devastated by civil conflict and a dangerous



Image: TopFoto

*Cloaked guards photographed
in Barcelona during the
Revolution of 1934*



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place for Spain's overwhelmingly rural population. Putting a stop to the rampant terrorising of the countryside was the primary argument for raising the Civil Guard. 'Halt, in the name of the Civil Guard!' was a cry that soon came to strike terror into the hearts of bandits who swarmed over Spain's mountainous regions. "This was a mammoth task, requiring a permanent presence and a great deal of patience," says Spanish historian Miguel López Corral. "The Civil Guard deployed a two-pronged approach to this challenge."

By far the most effective strategy was the deployment of pairs of Civil Guardsmen in constant rotation, who would patrol the roads and lanes within the jurisdiction of their barracks. A modified version of this system remains operational today. The second tactic was for larger units to sweep areas where bandits were known to be operating.

Changing of the Guard

A decade after the Civil Guard came into being, the Duke of Ahumada's successor, General Facundo Infante, was able to declare before Parliament, "Ten years ago, marauding and the theft of carriages were seen as routine events. Today this would be regarded with shock by the public." Also, in a countryside that was largely devoid of local emergency services, the Civil Guard was charged with providing assistance in cases of floods, fires or other calamities.

By the early 1850s the Spanish government had tacitly acknowledged the Civil Guard's monopoly on maintaining law and order in rural areas. The corps' only link to the authorities was through the top government official in each province, who until the late 20th century bore the title of Civil Governor. This bestowed on the Civil Guard a greater degree of autonomy from the government, while distancing it from the army. At the same time, this raised the question of how to define its status.

In terms of jurisdiction and structure, the guard was a militarised outfit, while legally it was a dependency of the Ministry of War. There were times when this ambiguity threw the Civil Guard into conflict with the army. For instance, it was an open question of whether

suppressing banditry was the exclusive remit of the Civil Guard. What if the brigands happened to be insurgents engaged in battling the established order? Was guerrilla warfare not the responsibility of the army?

The Civil Guard's institutional, jurisdictional and personal links with the military gave it a potentially dangerous degree of autonomy from civilian control, all the more so when the lines between military and civilian competencies were blurred by the presence of military officers in civilian positions.

Divided loyalty

The polarisation of Spanish politics and increasing levels of social unrest and violence in the late 19th and early 20th century were key factors in influencing Civil Guard loyalties when the military rebellion began in July 1936. The pivotal role of the guard in the Spanish Civil War cannot be overstated – in 1936 the corps had 35,000 men, roughly a third the regular army's strength. Around half of the Civil Guard units defected to the rebels, in defiance of orders and often with tragic consequences. In the city of Albacete, dozens of Guardsmen who sided with the rebels were murdered and their bodies cast into the sea. In Barcelona the regional general and colonel supported the Republic and were executed after the war. In all, between 1936 and 1939 the Civil Guard lost 20 per cent of its manpower in combat.

In almost a century up to the conflict, the Civil Guard's role as the keeper of law and order in the countryside had remained largely unchanged. However, the Franco dictatorship that came to power in 1939 brought difficult times for those charged with defending the regime. Animosity toward the Civil Guard came from both sides. Franco was mistrustful of the corps, since so many had remained loyal to the Republic. In most places where they stood firm, the uprising failed. At the same time the Civil Guard became a symbol of repression among university students and workers, whose protests in the streets and workplaces were brutally put down, albeit primarily by the police.

This state of affairs worsened dramatically, starting in 1968, with the first of more than 800 assassinations by the Basque terrorist movement ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna, 'Basque Homeland and Liberty'). In that year ETA launched a campaign of violence whose first victim was a young Civil Guard officer in the Basque Country shot dead when he stopped two men in the street in an identity search. This was the beginning of 50 years of ETA bombings and machine-gun attacks on Civil Guard patrols and barracks, which ended in 2018 when the Basque terrorists, realising they had lost almost all public support in the Basque Country, laid down their arms and dissolved the organisation.

The Civil Guard has in more recent days expanded its role to include assistance in international peacekeeping missions in countries from Guatemala to Bosnia, as well as training missions for local police forces in Mozambique, South Africa and Palestine. The corps is also at the forefront in providing disaster relief in Spain. Not unlike the Roman Catholic Church, the Civil Guard ranks as an establishment of great symbolic importance in Spanish society. Its role as the defender of the state and the social order, along with its uncompromising military discipline, has always shaped popular perceptions of the corps. Having overcome the stigma of the Franco years, that image is today a positive one. Suffice it to point out that a recent nationwide poll rated the Civil Guard the most highly esteemed public institution in Spain.

Members of the Guardia Civil on parade in 1975. Spain's ruler Francisco Franco died after holding power since the end of the Civil War in 1939

