Chapter Five
Public Order and Political Repression in the Rearguard

The offensives in Aragon and Mallorca coincided with political repression and a wave of often indiscriminate assassinations in Catalonia as well as in other zones controlled by the Republic. While the dimensions of this violence were later exploited and greatly exaggerated by the Franco régime, the repression was in fact severe in the first months of the war, and it has provoked a great deal of heated debate in discussions of the war. This violence began the moment the military rebellion was defeated in Catalonia, when the masses held power in their own hands. A disruption of the value systems and norms of conduct that reign in a society during peacetime is not unusual in circumstances of deep social upheaval, of course, and that was the case here: the military uprising in Catalonia and the arriving news of the military's victory in other regions quickly led to a reaction of the common people that aspired not only to neutralise the enemy in the rearguard, but also to settle accounts. Republican security forces were not the only ones engaged in the repression: every anti-fascist party and organisation, as well as some groups that emerged during the revolution, took part in it. Violence was first directed towards the insurgents and those suspected of supporting them, but it was also soon aimed at the Church and anyone associated with religion, businessmen, landowners, and political bosses (caciques). Inevitably, there were occasions when the violence had little to do with politics and ideology, and was instead motivated by a desire for personal revenge.
It has often been asserted that most of the violence of those early days was the work of ‘uncontrolled’ groups (*incontrolados*). These groups acted outside of political or trade union control, taking justice into their own hands and claiming that their actions aided the revolution by eliminating right-wing suspects, people sympathetic to the insurgents and lifelong class enemies. As many historians have shown, the *incontrolados* and their famous night-time *paseos* (strolls) were fundamentally a product of the revolutionary situation experienced in Barcelona and its industrial periphery. All contemporary European revolutions have seen the appearance of actors with little political or social consciousness, actors formed by urban and industrial misery and marginalisation, who intuitively believe that a new society can only be built by destroying lives, churches, the homes of the rich, and all urban symbols that reminded them of the ‘old world’.1

This violence occurred in response to a complex set of circumstances, and it is more important to make it comprehensible from a historical perspective than to simply condemn it for all of its arbitrary and bloody consequences. First of all, the initial outbreak of violence was caused by the war sparked by the insurgency, and the insurgents had already planned for the need to exterminate anyone who might oppose them. General Emilio Mola, who played a key role in the insurgency prior to July 1936, sent a confidential message on 25 May warning his co-conspirators that their actions ‘must be extremely violent in order to defeat the enemy as quickly as possible’.2 Franco, upon declaring war in the Canary Islands, insisted that ‘with no excuses, all punishments should be exemplary in the seriousness with which they are imposed and the speed with which they are carried out, without hesitancy or vacillation’. General Queipo de Llano became famous for radio broadcasts like the one on 23 July, when he delivered the following gem to any village planning to challenge the Civil Guard: ‘Morón, Utrera, Puente Genil, Castro del Río, prepare your graves!’ He told his men, ‘I authorise you, by my order, to kill like a dog anyone who dares challenge you’ and, according to some testimonies, announced: ‘Our brave legionnaires and regular soldiers have taught the reds what it is to be men, and on the way, they also taught the wives of the reds that now, finally, they have known true men, not castrated milicianos. Kicking and crying will not save them’.3