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0521821789 - The Splintering of Spain: Cultural History and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939

Edited by Chris Ealham and Michael Richards

Excerpt

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# 1 History, memory and the Spanish civil war: recent perspectives

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*Michael Richards and Chris Ealham*

For decades the historiography of the Spanish civil war was dominated by ‘grand narratives’ which focused primarily on the conflict’s origins and outcome. Historical time in Spain was marked and measured according to the chronology of the rise and fall of the Franco regime (1939–75). Interpretation was primarily moulded by the unavoidable reality of the polarised positions of the war itself and judgements about each of the competing sides.<sup>1</sup> Within Spain, the official bi-polarity, as depicted in the 1940s and 1950s, verged on the metaphysical – the division was between the forces of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, or ‘Spain’ and ‘anti-Spain’, the latter including regional nationalists, democratic liberals and working-class radicals singled out for repression. Outside Spain, simplistic Manichean myths were almost as persistent. In the extent of its over-simplification, the explanatory framework of ‘communism versus fascism’ went further than the other principal depiction of the war in the popular imagination as a struggle between ‘democracy’ and ‘fascism’.<sup>2</sup> The latter representation of the war, however, was also somewhat misleading, not least because it manifestly failed to incorporate adequately the fiercely contested social revolution which took place in republican Spain during the first year or so of the conflict.

To an extent, this liberal-democratic framework overlapped with another rigid structure of interpretation that depicted the war as a struggle between ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’. This way of looking at the conflict, though not without some merit, was weakened by the inherently normative nature of the key terms – ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ – which relied on a number of limiting assumptions. Republicans, for example, have often been viewed somewhat uniformly and uncritically since they have been deemed to be on the side of ‘modernisation’. Recent analysis of the public values, collective action and symbolic expression of both Spanish republicanism and, indeed, Catholic ‘traditional’ political thought and action, have begun to modify our understanding of the various competing forces as portrayed by the modernisation theory of the war.

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The aim of this book is to depart from these various dual frameworks by directing attention towards the cultural sphere. The essays here, commissioned from historians in Spain, Britain and the United States, explore the ideas and mentalities surrounding the cataclysm that engulfed Spain from 1936 to 1939. Rather than focusing on discrete forms of cultural expression, such as newspapers<sup>3</sup> and literature,<sup>4</sup> areas of ambiguity are confronted here in an effort to establish some dividing lines between the categories of ‘culture’, ‘ideology’, ‘consciousness’, ‘*mentalités*’ and ‘traditions’.<sup>5</sup> Part 1 explores three broad themes that have, in recent years, become paradigms for conceptualising the civil war historically: violence, nationalism and religion. The chapters that form part 2 apply particular cultural models and concepts – populism, urbanism and empowerment – to the tension-ridden politics of the republican zone during the war. In part 3 the focus shifts to regions or social groups that, in the main, supported the 1936 rebellion against the Republic and the ways in which this support was articulated and justified.

A common theme running through all of the contributions is the complex interaction of national political events and crucial *local* factors. These local, often cultural, facets of the landscape of the war, though neglected by historians, gave meaning to the struggle for those entangled in it. This *meaning* contributed to the shape and course of the war. Unsurprisingly, it is often these elements – those to do with experience – that figure most prominently in the ways the years of conflict are remembered, collectively and individually, in Spain. Thus, viewed from these several vantage points, the war can be seen as a process of fracturing or ‘splintering’, resulting from the many cleavages within society in the 1930s. It follows from this that the contributions to this volume tend to see the Spanish civil war less as a single great clash between two easily identifiable sets of ideas, social classes, or even ways of life, than historians have previously done.<sup>6</sup>

The devastating civil war of 1936–9 has long been seen as the defining moment of contemporary Spanish history, forming a vital part of Spain’s social and political inheritance. The dictatorship of General Francisco Franco was born as a result of the violent suppression of democracy during the conflict. Some 350,000 Spaniards lost their lives during the formal period of the war itself. A high proportion of these deaths resulted not from battlefield action but as a result of repression carried out by what became conceptualised, formally, as the two competing groups on each side of a single divide. It has been estimated that more than 200,000 Spaniards died in the first years of the dictatorship, from 1940 to 1942, as a result of political repression, hunger and disease

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related to the conflict.<sup>7</sup> The omnipresent figure of Franco, in state newsreel films and heavily censored newspapers of the post-war era, was a constant reminder, not merely of the lack of freedom, but also of the pain of the fratricidal conflict of the late 1930s.

Some 500,000 people fled into exile at the end of the war, and probably 50 per cent of these exiles were women and children, representing a dramatic displacement with considerable implications for memories of the conflict and its brutal aftermath.<sup>8</sup> At the end of 1939, according to the calculations of the regime, there were more than 270,000 men and women held in the regime's prisons from where political executions took place and where punishment beatings, suicides, starvation and epidemics were commonplace. Thousands of exiles ended up in French holding camps after fleeing the Nationalist armies and many Spanish republican supporters fought in the French resistance after May 1940. Large numbers of those captured were returned to Spain to face a firing squad or were interned in Nazi concentration camps as 'stateless enemies'. Between six and seven thousand exiles from Spain were to die in the extermination camp of Mauthausen.<sup>9</sup>

In European terms, Spain was unique in experiencing the great cataclysm of 1939–45 in the aftermath of a fully consummated civil war. There were of course important elements of social and political polarisation and conflict in many other European states in the 1930s and marked features of a more or less civil war mentality during the Second World War, especially in France and Italy. The result, in Spain, was that the civil war was remembered for several years in the context of the most repressive phase of the pro-Axis Franco dictatorship. In terms of state violence against political enemies (rather than 'racial aliens'), the Spanish regime was considerably more terroristic than Mussolini's fascists or Nazism.<sup>10</sup> Unlike fascism and Nazism, moreover, the Franco regime was neither militarily nor politically defeated at the end of the war. In the early decades the Spanish dictatorship sought legitimation on the basis of its triumph – the Nationalist 'crusade' became the principal founding myth of Franco's 'New State'. In the 1940s, Spanish histories of the civil war, and of the Second Republic (1931–9) which had been engulfed by the war, were written by army officers, policemen and priests.<sup>11</sup> In post-war Germany and Italy, processes of denazification and defascistisation, however inadequate, symbolised a break with the dark times of the 1930s. By contrast, in Spain the legal process of redress was aimed *against anti-fascists*, supporters of the Spanish Republic and leftists. Internationally, the cold war, which quickly followed the cessation of hostilities in 1945, produced an ideal context for the continuation of Franco's staunchly anti-communist

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regime. In this sense, if in no other, the Spanish experience of the ‘suspension of memory’, during long years of dictatorship, was similar to that of Eastern Europe. In spite of ‘constitutional evolution’, expressed, for example, in the ‘Spaniards’ Charter’ (*Fuero de los Españoles*) of 1945 – introduced to keep abreast with the new international emphasis on ‘human rights’ – Spaniards were not permitted to become political citizens. Independent political parties and trade unions were banned throughout the duration of the dictatorship.

Since the turn of the millennium, as the Spanish democratic Constitution of 1978 neared its twenty-fifth anniversary, there has been an upsurge of popular interest in the civil war and post-war period. Many stories have emerged of anonymous mass graves, imprisonment, forced labour and collective and individual humiliations.<sup>12</sup> The unearthing of mass graves has become central to organised attempts to recuperate aspects of ‘lost memories’ in Spain. Common graves became a feature of the landscape throughout Spain as the Nationalist wartime campaign proceeded. Many towns and villages all over Spain had a ravine, gully or embankment where the victims of civil war violence, especially the Francoist repression, were buried.<sup>13</sup> Many of the bodies of those on the ‘Nationalist’ (or ‘Franco’) side could be recovered in the aftermath of the war; this was far less the case with republican victims. Many people in each community long knew of the existence of the graves of those killed extra-judicially by the Francoists. But this local knowledge was only exchanged in limited, ‘off-stage’ ways and was rarely verbalised for decades. Knowledge of the graves became symbolic of a generalised silence about the traumas of the past. There was a great deal of fear surrounding the suppression of these memories, as has been illustrated in the testimonies of the now elderly witnesses of the recent exhumations who were children of the war and whose attitudes contrasted with the boldness of the succeeding generation.

A widely held view among people participating in these acts of recuperation is that there remains unfinished business to do with the war and its human effects. The Francoist side had always made it abundantly clear that it would not negotiate a settlement. After the war there was no peace settlement and vast numbers of people who were innocent of any crime were thus placed in a state of legal limbo. They had few formal rights with which to counter the panoply of punitive measures against republicans introduced by the Francoist state. The political implications of this claim are obvious. Genuine reconciliation, it has been argued in some quarters, requires a public acknowledgement of responsibilities for the past.

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Consent to the ‘pact of oblivion’ as a condition of peaceful transition in the 1970s has been central to the critique of the establishment politics of memory in Spain. From the standpoint of the protagonists of the transition, several features of the 1970s political landscape – not least the political violence of terrorist groups of left and right – appeared very much like the political violence during the Second Republic in the 1930s. Certainly the political class, but also broader society, was very aware of the risks of returning to conflict after Franco’s death. But this ‘pact’ meant that there remained no peace accord or explicit reconciliation following the death of Franco. Instead, a general amnesty for all ‘political crimes’ was signed in October 1977. Opposing the dictatorship, on the basis of republican or democratic conscience, was thereby officially equated with the institutional violence of the military regime of General Franco.

The Franco dictatorship was always keen to disguise its own origins in a conspiracy against the legal, elected Popular Front government. For at least two decades after 1939, history was assigned the task of justifying what the regime called the ‘Guerra de Liberación Nacional’. History, as taught in schools, amounted to the ‘Formation of National Spirit’.<sup>14</sup> A particular narrative of the Christian *Reconquista* of Spain from Islam, beginning in the eighth century and culminating in the Moorish and Jewish ‘purifications’ of the fifteenth century, was forever replayed. ‘Ownership’ of this notion that Spanish nationality was forged over centuries through war and propagation of the Catholic faith had been contested – though not terribly successfully – by the short-lived republican regime during the war, a point illustrated with specific examples in the chapters here by Xosé-Manoel Núñez and Pamela Radcliff.

Up to a point, the state-controlled version of history in the 1940s was built upon a pre-existing methodological conservatism. Historians have rightly been at pains in recent years to show that Spain was not so different to the rest of Western Europe as certain (usually foreign) commentators, going back to the sixteenth century, have charged. The Spanish experience of crisis in the 1930s and 1940s in some ways underlines the similarities with much of the rest of Europe.<sup>15</sup> In certain important respects, however, Spain was indeed out of step with the leading European states.

This difference can be illustrated by tracing and comparing the broad historical contours of Europe in the modern era. One of the leading historians of contemporary Spain, Santos Juliá, has emphasised the significance for historical method of the absence of a religious

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reformation in Spain, a cataclysmic social and political revolution, comparable to 1789 in France, or a transformative industrial revolution on the English model and scale.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as in other countries, consolidation of the Spanish central state in the nineteenth century was in many respects a largely *formal* process and its authority throughout society was often wavering.<sup>17</sup>

In the intellectual field, Spain could boast a rich cultural tradition, but natural and social science had not generally developed 'organically'.<sup>18</sup> Intellectual renewal in Spain was a very public process, relying to a considerable extent on rhetoric, pamphleteering and journalism, and the Spanish bourgeoisie often merited the commonplace accusation that it lived more from and for politics than thrusting economic dynamism.<sup>19</sup> The abiding concern of public thought in the post-imperial era from the eighteenth century and into the twentieth was with the 'problem' of national identity: defining 'Spanishness' and explaining 'the mysteries of the race' had priority over analysis of and concerns with social issues. The figurehead of this Catholic-nationalist orthodoxy during the latter nineteenth century was the polymath high-priest of Spanish (Castilian) nationalism, Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo.<sup>20</sup>

An important section of the social elite continued to yearn for the glories of the Catholic imperial past even into the 1930s and this vision reached a high point in the 'years of victory' from 1936 onwards. After the civil war, whenever this version was contested, much controversy was created. An example was the publication, in exile in 1948, of the account, by the liberal medievalist Américo Castro, of how the flourishing 'melting-pot' culture of Christians, Moors and Jews in pre-sixteenth-century Spain was in fact the very substance of Spanish identity. The author presented a convincing challenge to the Catholic essentialist picture of the past painted by the Franco regime. Copies of Castro's book were smuggled into Spain and circulated enthusiastically among students and intellectuals.<sup>21</sup>

The Franco state granted an exclusive right to patriotic sentiments and public self-justification to those groups and individuals who could demonstrate their wartime adherence to the rebel cause. Although, gradually, social groups discriminated against were able, with some difficulty, to express covertly some sense of community, its real articulation within the public sphere was always a problem until the death of Franco in 1975. The acknowledgement only of the sacrifice made for the Francoist side during the war made the post-war dismantling of wartime mentalities problematic. Memories of the republican war effort were denied expression, representation and public ritualisation. This was essentially a symbolic continuation of the war.

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While this reality was unchanging, there were important changes going on in Spanish society by the 1950s that had significant political effects.<sup>22</sup> Pressure from a circumscribed civil society for greater liberty and the regime's own ambitions toward greater international acceptance and economic development (the two things were closely related) meant that regime–society relations were not static in the 1950s and, especially, the 1960s. From the 1940s to the 1960s there was a gradual shift in the official discourse on the civil war. This shift was from the 'crusade' narrative of the war for 'the nation' against a foreign invasion, towards a new, more conciliatory, construction in the 1960s and 1970s, apparently widely supported within society, of the conflict as a fratricidal war (the mutual killing of brothers). The war gradually became a tragedy for which all Spaniards were somehow culpable.

Under social and political pressure for economic progress and development, a Decree of Economic Stabilisation was introduced in 1959. This effectively sanctioned the dismantling of many of the features of the 'internal colonisation' that had characterised life under Franco since the war and opened the way for massive foreign investment in Spain.<sup>23</sup> This Stabilisation Plan can be interpreted as a collective psychological turning point and a watershed in post-war economic, social and ideological *normalisation* leading to extraordinarily rapid economic growth. The myth of the 'economic miracle' would soon supersede the myth of the 'crusade' completely as the primary axis around which the official politics of memory revolved. In 1964, this dual 'stabilisation–normalisation' stimulated a major propaganda effort by the regime in celebration not of victory but of 'twenty-five years of peace'. The normalisation of history, as claimed by the reformers within the government, thus ran parallel to Spain's delayed participation in the Europe-wide post-war economic normality centred on mass consumption and consensus, in marked contrast to the concurrent reality of the Soviet bloc.

The values of the war meant less to the first post-war generation, which harboured a complex, more advanced set of legitimate social desires: vocations, private interests, appetites – which the dictatorial system and culture up to 1959 could not accommodate. As a corollary of rapid economic modernisation, each generation of Spaniards seemed more and more quickly to be discarding the customs of their parents. There was increasingly little choice but for the Franco regime to accept that rigid social control through primary agencies like family and school would no longer be viable.<sup>24</sup>

The liberalisation of the church, associated with the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s, was also, in part, a response to this accelerated urbanisation and the generational evolution that went with it.<sup>25</sup>

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Modernisers within the government also colluded in change, taking up a sociological analysis of Spain's recent history rather than the epic version full of outmoded symbolism and hero-worship which characterised the immediate post-war decade. These *aperturistas* invoked the liberal nineteenth century that tended to reconnect the state with society, relativising the place of the 1930s civil war in Spain's past and placing it within a much broader process of change. This official acceptance of change would pave the way for democracy with the death of Franco.

In the quarter of a century or so since 1975, Spanish history writing has undergone a process of renewal and transformation. This development has, in no small degree, been made possible by the disintegration of the dictator's regime. Francoist prescriptions had retarded the emergence of a critical historiography capable either of exploring the crisis of liberalism in the 1930s or of addressing the experience of those described by the regime as the 'anti-Spain'. Understandably, then, the intellectual climate of the decline of Francoism and the democratic transition of the 1970s facilitated an outpouring of histories of groups whose stories had previously been denied a place in history.<sup>26</sup> Researching 'sensitive' questions remained problematic, however. Until its dying days, the Franco state controlled access to much important archival material, encouraging a bureaucratic and secretive mind-set that relented only slowly with the widening post-Franco democracy.

It was, perhaps, a reflection of the fiercely labour-repressive nature of the dictatorship, that much of the social history writing of the immediate post-Francoist era focused on the workers' movement, whose role in Spanish history had been systematically distorted for decades.<sup>27</sup> The still repressive context and the reaction against the declining dictatorship, however, combined in encouraging functionalist accounts of the recent past. Almost inevitably, given the spirit of the times, it seemed reasonable to argue that every facet of social and political life had been more or less directly controlled from above by the dictatorship. This control seemed logically to have functioned in the interest of social equilibrium as defined by the regime. These influences, however, encouraged a relative lack of methodological and theoretical enquiry. In part, this reflected the weaknesses of the political left. Real discussions of theoretical problems caused major schisms in the main political organisations, like the PCE, because of their dogged determination not to question theoretical orthodoxies.<sup>28</sup>

The middle classes and aristocracy were yet to be considered an appropriate subject for social history, for example, thereby obviating any need for a relational understanding of the role of social class in history.



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Even into the 1970s, Spanish social history presented the concept of social class unproblematically as a category of analysis unmediated by any other factors. Major conclusions about the economic and political structure, like the alleged absence of a Spanish bourgeois revolution during the nineteenth century, or the claim that Spain lacked an urban petit-bourgeois fascist constituency, were nonetheless made. 'Class analysis' was ultimately reduced to descriptions of exploitation, an undifferentiated theory of domination, and notions of subordination and accommodation were hardly discussed.<sup>29</sup> The quite extensive popular support for Francoism, or, at least, tacit assent to its authority, seemed hardly to matter.<sup>30</sup> Historiographical advance allows us to see nowadays that the conflicts of the twentieth century were indeed partly caused and shaped by contradictions within the social structure such as those magnified by the late nineteenth-century uneven expansion of capitalist production (especially in the great *latifundio* estates of central and southern Spain). But, as this volume of essays argues, we can also see that the great political mobilisation of the 1930s reflected *both* the evolving balance of class relations *and* a variety of other tensions, contradictions and collective claims.

The renovation of historiography was also limited by the tacit 'pact of oblivion' that underpinned the transition to democracy of the 1970s and meant that most people were reluctant to ask difficult questions about the recent past for fear of jeopardising 'national reconciliation' and the restoration of liberal-democratic freedoms. The price for this was '*desmemoria*' ('forgetting'). The idea of the conflict as a tragedy for which all Spaniards were somehow to blame seemed to be generally accepted as a consensus across society.<sup>31</sup> According to this view, no particular social or political group was to carry the moral responsibility for the start and conduct of the civil war or the repression that followed. In practice, this presupposed suppressing painful memories derived from the dictatorship's division of the population into 'victors' and 'vanquished'.<sup>32</sup>

By the early 1980s, it was clear that, although there had been some liberalisation allowing for a change in the focus of historical investigation, the methodologies employed by many historians continued to be burdened by the past. The extent of this first post-Franco historiographical 'rupture' was, in effect, constrained. In particular, the reliance on methods associated with traditional political history ensured that social history was by-passed or, at least, defined in narrow terms. In the case of labour history, the cultural world of rank-and-file activists and militants was almost wholly neglected. The relationship between ideas, leadership and social classes was obscured beneath a welter of studies that dwelt

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on the history of workers' institutions, the relations between political parties and trade unions, and uncritical accounts of ideological polemics. This process resembled the 'great man' version of history, as workers' movement leaders were cast as 'kings' or 'laic saints'. In part, this conservatism reflected the nature of the Spanish labour movement itself.<sup>33</sup> The sense of social alienation around the turn of the century and into the 1930s in Spain produced a generalised working-class dissent but in a peculiarly *apolitical* form. The labour movement, both anarchist and socialist, developed no coherent or internally agreed theory of the state.<sup>34</sup>

The story was by no means one of complete stasis, however. Certainly, the growth of local histories of early twentieth-century Spain forms part of an important work of historical recuperation. This endeavour produced a series of 'maps' of obscured landscapes and organisations which demonstrate how, contrary to Francoist apologists, the social and political movements repressed by the dictatorship were firmly rooted in civil society and were not part of an 'alien conspiracy'.<sup>35</sup> This 'codified' element of the recuperation of collective memories – carried out by trained historians – has therefore been under way for more than two decades. The painstaking task of piecing together often fragmented and dispersed source materials in order to reconstruct the histories of repressed groups that were largely hidden from history during the dictatorship has required the application of considerable care and expertise. In some cases, the empirical strength of many local studies has approached a 'fetishism of facts', possibly produced in reaction against the decades of official control of access to 'the truth', as written down in official papers, and the sense of release of pent-up frustration provoked by public access to official archives.<sup>36</sup>

The 1982 call, made by two of the most influential social historians of modern and contemporary Spain, José Álvarez Junco and Manuel Pérez Ledesma, for 'a second rupture' within the historiography of twentieth-century Spain, particularly with regard to social and labour history, was therefore timely.<sup>37</sup> Broadly speaking, this 'manifesto' was based on the need for a far wider conception of social history. It applied, for example, several of the ideas that had shaped E. P. Thompson's path-breaking work on the culture of the English working class, but had not previously been incorporated into the practice of Spanish historians working on the twentieth century.<sup>38</sup> The call was for a social history reacting against what was seen as the methodological stasis of much Spanish history, advocating an authentic *working-class* history, a history of workers, their everyday lives and mentalities, and not just a history of those encadred in political and trade union organisations. Most importantly, the emphasis