

On the 80th Anniversary of the Spanish Civil War

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The Civil War was, with a doubt, the most important historical event in twentieth century Spain. A legally and legitimately elected government was assaulted by a segment of the military. The rebels were supported by a highly efficient civilian conspiracy. There was a before and an after to the war. The before was an imperfect and struggling democracy in need of political, economic, social and cultural modernization. The after, a dictatorship which lasted some 40 years. Over the course of the war there were nearly half a million deaths¹ and a massive repression. The war was also the occasion for an armed clash of the ideologies predominant in the 1930s: liberalism, socialism, fascism and communism, as well as the prelude to the yet undeclared but forthcoming European conflict.

The war shaped Spain with consequences reverberating in Spanish politics and society even to the present day. The literature it has generated is immense and shows no sign of lessening.² There is still intense debate about its origins, its meaning, its evolution, its repercussions, and its place in Spanish, European and, to some extent, world history.

Since General Franco's death in 1975, knowledge about the Civil War has followed an exponential curve. This is due to the gradual opening up of Spanish and foreign archives and the coming of age of two generations of historians barely affected by Francoist interpretations. However, much research remains to be done.

The past has never ceased to spread its baleful influence on post-Franco Spain. The most conspicuous examples are two contradictory events. Firstly, the passing of Law 52 of 26 December 2007 (usually known as Law of Historical Memory) by

1 The demographic catastrophe caused by the Civil War stretched far beyond mortalities. José Antonio Ortega and Javier Silvestre (*Las consecuencias demográficas*) estimate 540,000 deaths but also a drop of 576,000 in births, in P. Martín Aceña and E. Martínez Ruiz (eds), *La economía de la guerra civil* (Madrid 2006).

2 A. Viñas and J. Andrés Blanco (eds), *La Guerra Civil española, una visión bibliográfica* (Madrid 2016), with contributions from 40 historians covering publications in Spain and all European countries (except Greece), several American countries, Australasia and Japan. For a previous selection with less coverage in A. Viñas (ed.), 'La guerra civil', *Studia Historica. Historia contemporánea*, 32, (2014). Some 900 titles are identified.

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a clear parliamentary majority under the leadership of the PSOE (Social Democratic) minority government but against the wishes of the Conservative Popular Party (PP) in sole opposition. Secondly, the political decisions of the successor PP majority government designed to rid the law of any operational content (without repealing it) and to halt any further opening up of primary sources, in particular the military and internal security archives. This obstacle to research was the first stop in 40 years of democratic governments when, in terms of the availability of the documentation held in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Spain had previously been in an avant-garde position in Western Europe.³

Obviously, these restrictive measures must be seen in context. They were a reaction to Law 52/2007, but also the consequence of Conservative views of Spain's past. In comparison with other Western European countries, which suffered dictatorships or were overrun by the Fascist powers, the Spanish educational and political systems have shown a marked reluctance to critically address the pre and civil war years – even more so as regards the subsequent dictatorship. Responsibility for this must be attributed to all governments since 1975, but more specifically to the PP.

This is compounded by the fact that academic books about the Civil War and the dictatorship usually have quite small print runs. Historical education is a matter left to families, the media and, last but not least, acerbic polemicists. As a consequence, one or two generations of children have grown into citizens devoid of any substantial knowledge about the country's recent past.⁴ In this culture of ignorance or bias, resilient myths still abound. They are generally the conveniently packaged residue of the major tenets of Francoist interpretation of Spanish history.⁵

The ultimate reason is clear: Franco died of illness and old age in a hospital bed while his dictatorship was highly contested. However, all his political, social, military and administrative support was still in place. Two important forces have long remained impervious to the need to come to terms with a highly controversial past: the PP and the Catholic Church. The latter in particular under the last two Popes and the reactionary presidency of the Spanish bishops' conference. During this period an enormous beatification of victims of the 'red terror' (a 'historical memory' of sorts) took place, with many books claiming that there was a sustained leftist persecution of the Church from 1931 until practically the end of the war.⁶

3 For a while the archives of this Department also remained out of bounds. As far as the Ministry of Defence is concerned the PSOE Government prepared the declassification of some 10,000 documents which the PP Government never approved. The arguments put forward by the PP Defence secretary, Pedro Morenés, to justify this inaction were absolutely ridiculous if not outright shameful.

4 F. Hernández Sánchez, *El bulldozer negro del general Franco* (Barcelona 2016).

5 For a cursory list see my article 'The endurance of Francoist myths in democratic Spain', *International Journal of Iberian Studies*, 25, 3 (2012).

6 For background see M. Thomas, *The Faith and the Fury: Popular Anticlerical Violence and Iconoclasm in Spain, 1931–1936* (Eastbourne 2012).

Nevertheless, curiosity and interest surrounding the Republic (1931–9), the Civil War (1936–9), and the dictatorship (1936–75)⁷ never ceased. While during the Franco years Spaniards had to read about their immediate past in the works of some outstanding Hispanists (in general British, American or French), with the advent of democracy, research on the recent past undertaken by Spanish authors has finally come to the fore. In this respect the Spain of today is no different to other Western European countries.

The main foreign influence on Spanish historical writing remains British. The main protagonists are Professor Paul Preston and his former students, many of whom have gained academic positions at British and foreign universities.⁸ They have covered the whole gamut of twentieth century Spanish history and have repeatedly clashed with Spanish (and other) historians more prone to a rather inward-looking vision of the past.

The basic areas of contention are: (i) the explanations for the failure of the Second Republic before the war (1931–6); (ii) the attribution of responsibilities for the Civil War; (iii) the reasons for Franco's victory; (iv) the nature, size and modalities of the bloody repression during the war and dictatorship and (v) Franco's role in the modernization of Spain.

This article will make reference to some of the most recent writing in Spain, including my own, in the five areas just mentioned.

(i) This area is perhaps the most substantive. For the Franco dictatorship it was absolutely vital. Historians' opinions remain highly divided. Controversies are as charged as those pertaining to the failure of the Weimar Republic. This *Journal* has already presented a sample of the most respected Conservative authors, but the interested reader should also consult the recent history by Eduardo Gonzalez Calleja, Francisco Cobo Romero, Ana Martínez Rus and Francisco Sánchez Perez,⁹ the study by José Luis Martín Ramos,¹⁰ and the biography written by Julio Aróstegui of the Socialist leader Francisco Largo Caballero which is also a history of the PSOE during the Republican years.¹¹ These works contain an extensive bibliography where all nuances of historical interpretation are represented. When compared to the vast and repetitive production by the US historian Stanley G. Payne, the reader may wonder whether they even refer to the same country.

Some heuristic keys to explain the differences and divergences between academic Conservative historians (self-styled as 'scientific') can be found in an essay by Ricardo Robledo¹² and also in a collection of articles on Payne's methodology

7 Taking into account the fact that Spain was divided in two parts between July 1936 and March 1939.

8 F.J. Romero Salvadó (Bristol University), 'Investigando el laberinto español en el Reino Unido', in Viñas/Blanco, *La Guerra Civil española*.

9 *La Segunda República española* (Barcelona 2015).

10 *El Frente Popular* (Barcelona 2016).

11 *Largo Caballero. El tesón y la quimera*, Debate, Barcelona, 2013.

12 'Historia científica vs historia de combate en la antesala de la guerra civil. Algunas acotaciones', in Viñas/Blanco, *La Guerra Civil española*.

and his sources. Payne's biography of General Franco (written with a former neo-Nazi journalist) was chosen as an illustration.¹³

On the highly controversial issue of the qualitative and quantitative importance of political violence enormous methodological and empirical progress has been made. Deaths, strikes, and anarchy were one of the 'justifications' for the military uprising. With the demotion of other reasons of less saliency today, such as the alleged (but non-existent) Communist menace, the supposed danger of 'Sovietization' of Spain and the presumed threat of an imminent Socialist-led revolution, the alleged 'pre-revolutionary' violence has become a *deus ex machina* to explain what some authors still call the 'Alzamiento nacional' (following the Nazi concept of *nationale Erhebung*). In fact, such a pre-revolutionary situation only exists in highly biased interpretations of available data. The recent work of Eduardo Gonzalez Calleja¹⁴ has empirically tested the meaning and complex sources of such violence whose victims were basically on the left and will become a fundamental corrective to the wildly exaggerated allegations still abundant in the Conservative literature.

(ii) On the attribution of responsibilities for the outbreak of the war, Conservative historians in general seem to overlook the deep implications of the fact that the conspiracy against the government formed only a few weeks after the February 1936 general elections. Subversive meetings of generals took place in Madrid in early March. Some conspiratorial activities were detected in Valladolid.¹⁵

Far more importantly, the banker Juan March, Spain's greatest millionaire, was immediately requested to provide funding (half a million British pounds).¹⁶ The intention was to acquire modern war material from abroad. The reader must consider the political and operational implications of this. Less than a month had passed since the elections and Monarchist generals already felt the need to apply for Fascist assistance.

Conservative historians assert that the conspiracy was weak and limped along. They seem to be unaware of recent syntheses and empirical research¹⁷. Not many generals and senior officers were willing to launch themselves into an adventure with uncertain results. Many others were loyal to the government. To make

13 Á. Viñas (ed.), 'Sin respeto por la Historia. Una biografía de Franco manipuladora', *Hispania Nova*, 1 extraordinario (2015), available at <http://e-revistas.uc3m.es/index.php/HISPNOV/index> (accessed 10 November 2016).

14 *Cifras cruentas. Las víctimas mortales de la violencia sociopolítica en la Segunda República Española (1931–1936)* (Granada 2015). No Conservative historian has dealt with this subject as thoroughly as González Calleja. Some 60 per cent of the victims were on the left.

15 J. Rodríguez González and E. Berzal de la Rosa, *El valor de un juramento. Militares y milicianos en defensa de la República*, Fundación 27 de marzo/Ministerio de la Presidencia (León 2009). J.Á. Sánchez Asiain, *La financiación de la guerra civil española* (Barcelona 2012), has asserted that the Monarchist conspiracy against the Republic started on the same day of its proclamation.

16 J. Wake, *Kleinwort Benson. The History of two Families in Banking* (Oxford 1997).

17 See as recent examples F. Puell, 'La trama militar de la conspiración', in F. Sánchez Pérez (ed.), *Los mitos del 18 de julio* (Barcelona 2013), and F. Alía Miranda, *Julio de 1936. Conspiración y alzamiento contra la Segunda República* (Barcelona 2011).

progress the military had to rely on outside help. The role of civilian conspirators was twofold. At the political level the government would be destabilized as far as possible. Agitation would be created. Gunmen would provoke the left. A sense of existential crisis had to be created so as to increase the number of prospective coup supporters. The presumed looming Communist take-over was anticipated both in the media (with the Monarchist daily *ABC* at the forefront) and under cover in the garrisons.¹⁸ Meanwhile as yet undocumented negotiations with Italy carried on.

Four contracts were signed on 1 July 1936. The Monarchists bought bombers, fighters, transport aircraft, hydroplanes and an enormous amount of bombs and munitions. The first delivery was to take place in the same month. Further deliveries were scheduled for August. They were not meant for a simple coup but for a short war. Hydroplanes were needed to protect Mallorca, the island where March's wishes were law. Few, if any, Conservative historians have deigned to mention all of this. It was not the Soviets who provided arms to the Communists but the Fascists who did so to the conspirators.

Civilians, in particular from the CEDA, used their contacts with British diplomats to convince them that a Soviet-supported revolution was in the offing. In spite of the fact that Comintern intercepts showed the contrary, the British Government ignored them and preferred to rely on its diplomatic, MI6 and Naval Intelligence sources. How raw data was processed into finished intelligence for policy-makers remains unknown.¹⁹

In parallel, right-wing and Fascist gunmen increased their provocative activities by targeting prominent left-wing personalities and sowing unrest which did in fact materialize. Then the Monarchists appealed to the Italians in June 1936 asking for money for their gunmen (there was quite a substantial number of Falangistas among them) and for economic aid to the military conspirators should the coup fail. This time the response was negative. Mussolini had been willing to subsidize the Fascist Falange and to enlarge Italian espionage activities in Spain but for reasons unknown this request was not accepted.

The two principal leaders of the Spanish right, the Monarchist José Calvo Sotelo and the CEDA leader José María Gil Robles, timed their famous speeches in Parliament denouncing the political violence of the left so as to provide a suitable cover: one in April for what was considered an imminent military coup, and the other in June 1936, possibly to encourage Mussolini to make haste with the negotiations on war supplies.²⁰

18 Herbert R. Southworth's two classic works have lost none of their relevance: *El mito de la cruzada de Franco* (with a prologue by Paul Preston), many editions (the first one dates from 1963 and was published in Paris), and *Conspiracy and the Spanish Civil War: the Brainwashing of Francisco Franco* (London 2001). For the gunmen see I. Saz, *Mussolini contra la II República* (Valencia 1986); for Fascist subsidies, see A. Viñas, *La Alemania nazi y el 18 de julio* (Madrid 1974); for Fascist espionage see M. Canali, *Le spie del regime* (Bologna 2004).

19 A. Viñas, *La conspiración del general Franco y otras revelaciones sobre una guerra civil desfigurada* (Barcelona 2012). No MI6 records on the prewar and war situations have yet been released.

20 General Mola, the de facto chief of staff of the military conspiracy, had penned a manifesto for the April attempt which has been partially reprinted in B. Felix Maiz, *Mola frente a Franco* (Pamplona 2007). For the

(iii) The reasons for Franco's victory have given rise to enormous controversy. The accidental death of General Sanjurjo, supreme head of the uprising, together with the earlier murder of Calvo Sotelo (possibly the putative head of the future Government) by left-wing elements made Franco's ascent possible, not least because he also became the recipient of unforeseen German and contracted Italian assistance.²¹

There are authors who emphasize the importance of the international factors (the non-intervention policy²² and unremitting Nazi-Fascist support which went well beyond the help provided to the Republic by the USSR). Others give preference to domestic factors (political turbulence in the government controlled area vs economic, financial, political and military discipline in the Franco dominated regions).²³ However, the comparative scarcity of weapons and trained soldiers opened the way for early victories by the rebels. Franco met with a major failure only when he proved incapable of taking Madrid in 1936. Following German advice he then concentrated on the Northern front. This was the key to final victory.

Franco's strategy of pursuing a long war which would enable him to 'cleanse' the occupied areas and destroy the Republican army combined with the strong resistance mounted by the Republican Prime Minister Juan Negrin which was dependent on international developments. Franco also opted for bloody repression in the occupied territories and gradually built on previous victories.²⁴

(iv) As exemplified in Paul Preston's study on the Spanish Holocaust, violence and repression during the Civil War and the dictatorship have become the most vibrant and deeply researched area in Spanish historiography. Rarely a week goes by without two or three books being published on the subject. General analyses, overviews, geographical studies, microhistories, biographies of victims, testimonies of witnesses, and so on are now easily available. Every conceivable approach (social, anthropological, cultural, psychological, social, economic,

radicalization of the right see E. González Calleja, *Contrarrevolucionarios. Radicalización violenta de las derechas durante la Segunda República* (Madrid 2011). For the fascistization process of the same right see F. Gallego, *El evangelio fascista. La formación de la cultura política del franquismo, 1930–1950* (Barcelona 2014). A brief resumé, 'Fascistization and fascism: Spanish dynamics in a European process', *International Journal of Iberian Studies*, 25, 3 (2012).

21 For the former see A. Viñas and C. Collado Seidel, 'Franco's Request to the Third Reich for Military Assistance', *Contemporary History Review*, XI, 2 (2002). For the latter see M. Heiberg, *Emperadores del Mediterráneo* (Barcelona 2003).

22 A new book by D. Jorge, *Inseguridad colectiva: La Sociedad de Naciones, la Guerra de España y el fin de la paz mundial* (Valencia 2016), has closed the gaping hole existing in the deconstruction of the non-intervention policy by focusing attention on the League of Nations. A recent PhD thesis by Miguel Iñiguez Campos (Universidad Complutense) has clarified the myriad obstacles the Republic was confronted with in acquiring weapons through the black market in the first and most important year of the war.

23 There is a certain tendency nowadays to prioritize discipline as a fundamental factor in Franco's victory. For an overview see C. Barciela and I. López Ortiz, 'En defensa de la historia: mitos, represión y otras cuestiones económicas en el debate historiográfico de la guerra civil', in Viñas/Blanco, *La Guerra Civil Española*, and the memoirs by Francisco Serrat, Franco's first proto-secretary of Foreign Affairs, *Salamanca 1936* (Barcelona 2014).

24 I have compared the two strategies in my trilogy *La soledad de la República, El Escudo de la República* and *El Honor de la República* (Barcelona 2006–9).

legal, gender-oriented) has been employed to explain the ferocity of the Francoist repression and its quantitative and qualitative differences with that carried out in the Republican-held areas.²⁵

In fact, the kind of repression envisaged by the military was described in the famous ‘Confidential Order No. 1’ issued by General Mola at the end of April 1936. ‘The action should be extremely violent so as to subdue the enemy as quickly as possible since it is strong and well organized. The leaders of all political parties, societies or trade unions who will not make common cause with the Movement are to be put in prison. Exemplary punishment will be effected upon them...’.

Under military control those general formulations were applied in two ways: by summary executions and by expeditious martial courts set up in contravention of the legal order. So as to confer some veneer of ‘legality’ to the proceedings the rebels referred back to the superseded ‘Fundamental Law of the Army’ of 30 June 1876. Loyalty to the government was transmuted into ‘rebellion’. This ‘juridical’ gimmick was the basis of the subsequent repression. It was possibly thought up by Franco’s legal counsel, an officer and notary called Lorenzo Martínez Fuset.²⁶

(v) The Civil War was an economic disaster for Spain (not for Franco who managed as I have shown in *La otra cara del Caudillo*,²⁷ to make himself a millionaire using highly dubious methods and procedures implementing his own version of the *Führerprinzip*). The country had traditionally been plagued by the massive shortcomings of a rather underdeveloped economy. The disaster was compounded by the Fascist dream of autarky put in place after the victory. In the Second World War, Spain could not play the same role as in the First World War because its foreign and commercial policy orientation was directed towards the Fascist Powers. Franco also considered a military alignment with the Axis. That he did not do so is viewed by many Spaniards as his most outstanding achievement. In fact, a number of factors helped Spain to remain as a ‘benevolent neutral’. One could mention the prostration of the economy and the Armed Forces; the lack of assistance from Germany; British and US economic and political pressure; the incompatibility between German and Spanish war aims; and the enormous bribing of Franco’s brother and most important generals by Juan March with British money. Once Spanish neutrality was ensured, divergences between the UK, the US and the French governments on how to treat Franco saved the dictatorship.²⁸

25 Publications in notes 2 and 11 include several contributions dealing with the most relevant bibliography and the current status of research undertaken in Spain on the repression. They are written by well-known specialists (José Luis Ledesma, Francisco Moreno Gómez, Juan José del Aguila, Gutmaro Gómez Bravo, Angel Luis López Villaverde, among others). Present-day concentration on the Francoist repression is easily explained since the Republican one was very much highlighted during the dictatorship. The results of the new research are, however, difficult to accept for broad segments of Spanish society, which remains deeply divided.

26 For a general overview of the ‘legal’ niceties see G. Sánchez Recio and R. Moreno Fonseret (eds), *Aniquilación de la República y castigo a la lealtad* (Alicante 2015).

27 A. Viñas, *La otra cara del Caudillo* (Barcelona 2015).

28 The most recent literature on these subjects are my *Sobornos. De cómo Churchill y March comparamos a los generales de Franco* and C. Collado Seidel, *El telegrama que salvó a Franco*, both in *Crítica*

Franco continued presiding over the impossible autarkic dream until 1959. He had no clue of how to modernize the Spanish economy. It was the clear and imminent danger of bankruptcy caused by the lack of foreign exchange which forced him to accept a change of direction. The Spanish economy and society modernized in the 1960s in spite of Franco, not because of him.²⁹

The fact upon which few Conservative historians elaborate is simply put. In Italy, the path to Mussolini's *Machtergreifung* was built on 8000 deaths in the tumultuous years between 1918 and 1922.³⁰ In Spain 2700 people killed, most of them by the security forces, served to justify the military and civilian-supported rebellion. This led to half a million additional deaths and another half a million drop in births. Why? Perhaps because a substantial part of the Spanish population defended their political, economic and social advancement with the weapons available to them, while the democracies pursued their policy of non-intervention. The outcome? Forty years of dictatorship.³¹

Biographical Note

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as well as X. Hualde, *El 'cerco' aliado*, Universidad del País Vasco, Bilbao. All three have been published in 2016.

29 In the reference of note 11 see M. Sanchis i Marco, 'Franco, una rémora para el desarrollo económico y moral de España'. The best Franco biography remains the one written by Paul Preston, updated in Spanish in 2015.

30 Italian deaths in E. Gentile, *E fu subito regime. Il fascismo e la marcia su Roma* (Rome 2012).

31 In this article the Franco regime has been identified as a dictatorship because technically it was so. Franco's power was always based on the public and secret implementation of the *Führerprinzip*.