

A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Editor's Note. The following communication was received by the Acting Editor, during the absence of Father Kiemen. The letter contains the reaction of a thoughtful student to a recent book¹ on the Spanish Civil War which had won uniformly laudatory reviews in the learned journals of this country. It is recognized, of course, that the Spanish Civil War is a controversial subject. However, it is hoped that an intelligent discussion such as is contained in this letter, both of the book and of the war, may help to clarify the area of controversy and thus help arrive at the truth.

A quarter of a century has passed since the beginning of the war in Spain, not the "Spanish Civil War." A generation born and raised during the three war years is now reaching adulthood. The world has been transformed by World War II, by the end of the old empires, by the expansion of Soviet imperialism, and by the increasing economic and political unity of the West. Spain is different, especially its demographic and economic structure, both because of Francoism and in spite of it. The Republican emigration survives, but its political disintegration is an expression of the decline of prewar organized political movements.

Can all of this—and much more, also pertinent to the distant events of that war—justify the kind of history Thomas has written? In a subtitle (the second serious error on the title page) it is called "an objective history." That is to say, a dissection. The Spanish dead, however, usually do not lie at rest in their graves. It is well known that El Cid won battles after his death. As a matter of fact, only fifty years ago some Spaniards, who were famous for other reasons, clamored for seven locks for his tomb. In Mexico, too, there is another unentombed corpse of a Spaniard, serving as a banner and rallying point for an unending discussion regarding the future of that country. Is it so miraculous that the same should be true of the war?

The war in Spain, perhaps because it settled nothing, is even less disposed to be buried in the mausoleum of an academic debate. And even if that were not true, its history could never be written by one who describes himself as an "impartial observer." As the most orthodox of vehement Spaniards said when he was writing the history of the nonorthodox, the history of the war "must not be written with that indifference which presumes impartiality."

Indifference and lack of comprehension, not objectivity and impartiality, are what we find in Thomas' book. And a certain cold contempt, derived from inherited prejudices, become evident from the very first pages when

¹ *The Spanish Civil War*. By Hugh Thomas. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961. Pp. xxix, 720. \$8.50.)

he describes the Puerta del Sol as the lively central plaza of Madrid where so many revolutions have begun. Or, when he ascribes the fatal vacillation of the Republican government to Casares Quiroga's tuberculosis; or the lack of the dispassionate calm in Calvo Sotelo so characteristic of the rainy region of his birth to his "gipsy blood"; and the popularity of the Pasionaria to her preaching that Spanish women will give birth to their children without the interference of their husbands. Thomas concludes his prologue with a paragraph à la Hemingway:

"The question implicit in all minds as the summer mounted, as the bullfight season attained its meridian, was: Will it be war?"

I have to admit that I, probably like many others, accepted the early reviews of this book with less resentment than that which I show now. The title and subtitles did not discourage me, even with their explicit threats of objectivity. But that is not all. I must say that, as one who fought in that war, I would like to see it definitely dead and buried. That is, of a natural death, not one at villainous hands, much less buried alive by an unconcerned English historian.

On the other hand, I suspect that Thomas attempts covertly to bury with the war a feeling of heavy guilt. The countries that consented to and applauded the Munich policy cannot have a clear conscience, not even today. They cannot forget, and if they could we should not and would not let them forget, that they are jointly responsible for the expansion of Soviet imperialism and for the venomous flowering of several contemporary tyrannies, including that of Franco.

If the war in Spain had been simply a "Spanish civil war" (one more paroxysm of that nation's destructive vitality) and the present Francoism an expression of latent forced animation (another series of "años bobos"), it would be possible to forget the responsibility of the democratic countries.

To reduce the tragedy of Spain to a purely Spanish drama, in which the democratic world was emotionally but erroneously involved, is tantamount to ridding oneself of guilt. In this sense, Thomas' book serves as a catharsis for his readers. It enables the outsider to view the war in Spain much in the same way as, with horrified fascination, he looks upon such other Spanish peculiarities as the bullfights or the flagellant processions. He can turn his attention to "Carmen," the gypsies and the gorings of Manolete, without trying to understand the universal significance of the life and death of Unamuno or Machado, of García Lorca or Miguel Hernández, or of the voluntary exile of Juan Ramón Jiménez or Pablo Casals.

I am not overly concerned with the numerous errors of fact to be found in the book even though it is supposed to be an "objective" history; not even by foolish remarks, such as the Basque workers are not as British as they might be because they eat cat stewed in sherry. What is intolerable,

besides the masked indifference of pious statements, is the distortion of the broad lines of Spanish history and, consequently, of the significance of the war. My feelings may appear to be exaggerated, but to me, Thomas' book is nothing more than another link in the chain of "black" literature about Spain, all the more irritating whenever it is hypocritically sympathetic.

Observe, for example, the flippancy with which Thomas dismisses the question of the character of Spanish history, which is quite special in comparison with that of other European countries and which, if not understood, would make it impossible to understand the war. Thomas states that its character is not "unique" in a sense distinct from that of French or English history. If by this he means that Spanish history is no more "Spanish" than French history is "French" or English history "English," he is probably right. However, when Thomas adds that, in any case, the problem of Spain is one of "backwardness" and "fossilization," he shows that he has understood very little.

Spanish history, taking the history of the rest of Western Europe as an arbitrary norm, is above all the product of different rhythms and circumstances. A discussion of feudalism in the Peninsula should be sufficient to open Thomas' eyes. Since the times of Martínez Marina and Herculano there has been a lively debate on whether there was a feudal regime in Spain, such as existed in other regions of Europe for several centuries. Ortega goes to the extreme of ascribing Spanish "decadence" partly to this circumstance, conveniently forgetting, of course, the other "circumstance," that is, the Islamic invasion and the Reconquest.

The germ of feudalism in Spain did not prosper because of more than seven hundred years of frontier war, with its constant military and resettlement needs. The early centralizing authority of the kings in their role as caudillos; the royal charters for frontier settlement, establishing towns of citizens and free farmers; the decrees permitting the liberation and emigration of the farmers from the manorial lands; and the social mobility permitted and stimulated through military, governmental, and religious channels are only some of the many factors that created a favorable climate for an institutional and social system which was much freer and more democratic than that of the rest of Europe. The weaker the European influences and the more specific the Peninsular circumstances, the stronger are the indigenous forms of Spanish life, as in Castille. The stronger the influences and the more similar the circumstances to those of Europe, the more vigorous are the expressions of the Peninsular feudalism, as in the Spanish Marca and in Aragón.

Spain was eventually unified and shaped as the first large modern state in Europe, not because of the activities of the regions where feudalism was more strongly felt, but because of the most uniquely Spanish region, Castille. And precisely since feudalism was a marginal factor in the history

of the Peninsula, the urgency to eliminate its last vestiges was not felt there as much as it was, for example, in France. Feudalism in Spain was also not as strategically placed as in Great Britain to survive in agreement with the royal power, and the new bourgeoisie. The survival of certain feudal forms in Spain, or rather military-manorial under a monarchical centralized system, does not constitute evidence of institutional backwardness. As anthropologists would state, one is dealing with functional survival, and not of a useless fossil, as indicated by the vitality in the Americas of the *encomienda* and of the military-manorial systems.

If the history of Spain is characterized by one single factor, it is because of these differences of rhythm and of circumstances from the rest of Europe. In certain aspects, Spain anticipates and precedes institutions and cultural traits and complexes which appear later on in Europe. At other times, Spain exhibits real or apparent anachronisms to European eyes. Spain constructed the first modern colonial empire and was the first to lose it. It formed the first modern state, and even in the twentieth century it struggles to maintain its unity. It developed the first European manufacturing industries and occupies presently one of the last places in the industrialized West. It began, with hardly a few years of interval, the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. It secularized its civilian authority and made religion the most powerful link of its unity.

The apparent paradoxes in Spanish history are interminable, for even when they are expressed in simplified terms of anticipation and modernism, or of backwardness and anachronism, the judgments are only provisional. The building of the colonial empire was an incomplete undertaking. But when it was lost, Spain also began on a path which has been followed by other of the European imperial powers which, in this instance, are decidedly anachronistic. A short time ago Strachey indicated the desirability of studying the Spanish case for the edification of the English. On the other hand, would it not be worth considering the similarity between the Spanish solution to the problems of the national bond (religion) and the modern tendencies to ascribe ideological content to the current supranational ties ("The West," "Communism," etc.)?

We may agree, perhaps, that not all that is "modern" in England is modern, and that not all of the Spanish "backwardness" is really backwardness. And we may agree, this time with no doubt whatsoever, that the English scientific and technical progress is really progress, even at the cost of the terrible obliteration of what used to be its traditional culture; and that the Spanish scientific and technical backwardness is truly backwardness, even though Spain preserves its rich and varied traditional culture.

I believe that with this digression I have not strayed from Thomas nor from the subject, since the war in Spain should also be seen in the same light. Thomas states that the Spaniards fought a civil and anachronistic war, and

that we were impelled toward it because of the as yet unresolved conflict in Spain between "modernness" and "backwardness." The truth is, however, that it was neither civil nor anachronistic. It was not as national, in the narrow sense, or as anachronistic as, for example, the reform under Cardinal Cisneros, which superficial minds attempted to identify with other medieval reform movements without realizing that his modernity was demonstrated, on the one hand, by the success of the Protestant reform in northern Europe and, on the other, by its failure in Spain.

Or, to state it another way, the Cisneros reform made practically unnecessary any other subsequent reform, and especially the Protestant one. The Counter-Reform, which also was not a purely national phenomenon in Spain, completed and amplified the work of Cisneros with a modernistic reaction compared to the medievalness of the Protestant reform which, among other things, attempted to extend the feudal authority to the freedom of conscience (the subjects follow the religion of their temporal master).

The war in Spain foreshadowed the ideological wars of the second half of the twentieth century, including World War II, as surely and radically as the Spanish War of Independence, to give another example, foreshadowed the uprisings and national wars of the nineteenth century in Europe. Fichte and others in Germany understood this meaning of the popular Spanish uprising against Napoleon, with a clarity which we would have liked to have found again in Thomas. But though the English historian has not missed the mechanics of learning, he has failed to experience the passion necessary to discover the principal truth about the war in Spain. The presence of an English army on the Peninsula did not convert the Spanish uprising of 1808 into an international war. Similarly, the absence of foreign armies in 1936 did not make the war in Spain a civil war. The later intervention of Italian, German, Portuguese, and Moroccan units as well as units of the Soviet Union and the International Brigades, began in a strange way to turn the war in Spain toward a conflict of a narrower national character. Is this one more Spanish paradox, or could it be that in that moment the Spanish began to free themselves of the "ideological complex" which today, on the other hand, dominates the conflict of the world powers?

For more than seven centuries the Spaniards fought the war of Reconquest with an ideological (religious) content. During this period of long conflict between Christianity and Islam (West-East), Spain discovered and practiced tolerance, if not religious indifference. In 1936 the world saw at once what Thomas now denies: the ideological and consequently the universal content of the war in Spain. And the realization was the discovery of a reality evident from the first to the Spaniards themselves on both sides, even before the outbreak of war. A careful observer, however, could perceive even during the war certain symptoms of the abatement of ideological fever that have become clearer during the postwar period as, on the contrary, the fever has been increasing in the remainder of Europe and the world.

The Spaniard of today, I fear and hope, is cured of ideologies as Don Quijote was of chivalries just before his death. It is very possible that there will be no lack of Sanchos to whom to transmit the madness. But, for the moment, the Spanish problem is truly a national problem, without changing the fact that the war is what it was: an ideological conflict of a universal and historical character which effectively and emotionally involved the modern world. Is this distortion from yesterday to today, from the universalism of 1936 to the parochialism of 1961, what has confused the English historian, as the intolerance of the sixteenth century makes it difficult to understand the medieval religious tolerance?

Aside from these and other weaknesses in his conception of Spanish history, Thomas is altogether too slavish to the personalized detailed history and the irresistible British temptation toward the picturesque to be able to write a history worthy of the war. The persons utilized by Thomas as dramatic figures of the war were and are little more than shadows. We may agree that the war lacked great and extraordinary figures, especially if one tries to compare it with other times, as is proper. The figures of the war in Spain have such names as the Volunteers, the Anarchists, the Defenders of Madrid, those who participated in the 19 of July in Barcelona, etc. Collective and not individual heroes, among whom by pure accident now and then the name of an individual is preserved, more as a symbol than as a real person. The other heroes are, nearly always, the product of organized propaganda or rather organizers of propaganda.

The inordinate interest in the picturesque anecdote and the pseudo-hero has a strange though not uncommon comparability to the complacency with which Thomas describes the crimes committed in the front lines and by the rear guard. I have no excuse to offer for these crimes, and I do not believe that any Spaniard can find them. I doubt that the Germans and English have valid excuses for their own war crimes either except, perhaps, the very British one that in their case they were generally committed with efficient premeditation. What seems to Thomas to be more unforgivable than anything else is emotional violence and the lack of efficiency which cruelty adds to crime.

The mere enumeration of the Spanish atrocities is already cruel enough so that there is no need for Thomas or anyone else to embellish them with macabre details, doubtful happenings, and obviously untrue stories. I do not wish, and I doubt that anyone would wish, to draw a curtain over the past. This past is inexorably ours, and we and other generations of Spaniards will have to live with it. Fortunately, no forgetting or escape is possible, just as there is none for the burden of history. This is just about the first thing a Spaniard discovers when he goes to the Americas and sees the shadows of Cuauhtemoc and Atahualpa, of Cortés and Pizarro, of Bartolomé de las Casas and Junípero Serra, the towers of the cathedral of Mexico, the palaces

of Cuzco and the pyramids of Teotihuacan. For our crimes as Spaniards in a war of historical and universal significance; we shall each have to answer to a tribunal higher than those Franco or the Republic established to mete out punishment for those crimes by perpetuating others. That tribunal will certainly be more severe and more just than that of Thomas.

Another strange note in Thomas' book is the overestimation of the International Brigades and of Doctor Negrín. The coincidence is not accidental, for here as in other parts of the book the author is a victim, albeit a willing one, of propagandistic myths and of prejudices. No Republican combatant can ever forget what the International Brigades did for his cause, motivated by both their idealism and calculated reasons. It is, nevertheless, necessary to state that the International Brigades were small in numbers: about 12,000 men at a time when the Republican army numbered nearly 700,000 soldiers in arms. In the series of battles in the Jarama, which Thomas describes as a fight carried on almost exclusively by the International Brigades, the Republicans suffered approximately 10,000 casualties. Yet, at that time, there were only two undermanned foreign brigades of less than 5,000 men in all, of whom about one thousand were casualties.

The great military contribution of the International Brigades to the war in Spain can be found in their splendid military organization and discipline, which served as a model for the others. They made their contribution to combat morale through their presence, creating thereby the impression, though false, that the democratic world was being mobilized against Fascism and in the defense of the Republic. Their role was also tremendously exaggerated by the propaganda machines, and Thomas has drunk of the musty wine made from the grapes of 1936-1939.

The case of Negrín is very similar. Propaganda made of him the nearly superhuman hero of Republican resistance. But the historian, above all the "objective" one, should be capable of something more than the consumption of propaganda. The stature of Negrín and the strength of his purpose can be seen more clearly during the last days of Madrid and during his years of exile, than under the spotlights and the scenery arranged to diminish and destroy his political and personal opponents during the war.

On the other hand, one has the impression that, in enhancing the importance of the International Brigades, Thomas attempts to counter-balance in the mind of his readers the effectiveness of the Italian, German, Portuguese and Moroccan intervention. From a quantitative point of view, this attempt is ridiculous and quite shameful in the light of the total impact made by the military elite, composed of the air force, the tank, anti-tank and anti-aircraft units, the flotillas of ships and submarines, the divisions of infantry, and the German and Italian instructors. This conclusion can be drawn, it should be said in acquittal of Thomas from the figures which he himself utilizes, but not from his analysis of the correlation of the forces during the war and in the decisive battles.

In this connection I would like to mention only a few examples: Is it by any chance the same thing to have constantly in service six infantry divisions whose casualties are replaced and who are relieved by fresh troops, trained and stationed in Italy, as to have six divisions whose casualties are replaced and who are relieved by other ragged divisions and by adolescent recruits? Is it the same to have an aviation corps with periodic relief from Germany, as to have a group with pilots who have to be trained at a speed commensurate with their casualties? Is it the same to sail under neutral flags or under the protection of non-intervention and to use this advantage to torpedo merchant ships and to shell ports as it is to sail a few small ships under the flag of a belligerent? Is it the same to receive munitions, arms, trucks, tanks, planes, gasoline, food in generous quantities and over free seas, as it is to produce them or to receive them through calculated greed, over hostile seas and smuggled across frontiers closed by cowardice or disloyalty?

Thomas pretends to be surprised that no break in the lines of the Francoists produced an advance of more than twenty or thirty kilometers. Thomas should know that this was all the Republican soldier could advance by walking, before the Francoist forces were able to re-establish the broken line by means of their Italian and German airplanes, tanks, artillery, and trucks. Any of the serious breaks in Aragón, that of Quinto-Belchite or of Teruel, would have produced a collapse of this front, if the Republicans had had available the motorized columns which were denied to them by the non-intervention policy of the English and French, or if the Francoists had not had available the elements which German and Italian non-intervention made available to them. But all of this is the kind of history that found no place in Thomas' book.

To this exhibition of cynicism disguised as objectivity, Thomas adds scorn. He tells us that the worst predictions of the friends of the Republic never came true. Franco did not enter World War II at the side of Hitler and Mussolini. With the exception of providing raw materials, of permitting German submarines free use of Spanish bases, and of sending the Blue Division against the Russians, Spain remained neutral and in fact had to request British financial assistance in the end. The war in Spain was, after all, doubly useless.

Does Thomas really believe that England and France bought Franco's neutrality with their miserable humiliations during the nonintervention period, and with their shameful and unpardonable delivery of Spain to Fascism? Or could it be true that neutrality was paid for by nearly one million Spanish deaths and by a nation ruined, destroyed, and divided? If the Republican resistance did not have any other value, it did have this: it forced Franco to be neutral.

I would like to suggest to Thomas the following historical problem, even though I recognize that the question is outside of the framework of

“objective” history. Can he imagine World War II with a belligerent fascist Spain that had not gone through the destruction and the suffering of the “civil” war? For example, I could see France receiving not only one but two stabs in the back; Gibraltar nullified and the Western entrance to the Mediterranean blocked; Hitler, Franco, and Mussolini dividing up North Africa and marching, but this time triumphantly, to the Suez Canal. I can even conceive of the German war machine looking for and obtaining petroleum and other raw materials in the Near East, and not in Eastern Europe or in Russia. I can even imagine the Soviet Union and Germany keeping the Hitler-Stalin pact for an additional period of time, and the Allied nightmare come true: Japan and Germany joining forces in India.

Of course, all of this is “southern” imagination. However, in order to prevent this fantasy from becoming reality there had to be, among other things, the neutrality of Spain. And for this neutrality, although not exactly for this reason, hundreds of thousands of Spaniards died and a nation was prostrated. The principle error of the Spaniards was once again to be ahead of the times (Thomas believes that this is backwardness), fighting World War II before it actually began. Belligerents before their time and untimely neutrals, our clock continues to tick but not in the same rhythms as the others; I would not be one of those who would again try to change its hands by force.

The hour of Spain is at present not that of ideological fever, that of universalism, that of a sense of history and of tragedy. It is the hour of the moribund Don Quijote, of repentance, of the importance of the home, of security, and of common sense. For this reason it is now so difficult to understand the war in Spain, and the Spaniards themselves call it useless madness. Therefore, Thomas has not been able to write his history and for this reason nobody will write it, unless it be an old warrior, tired and disillusioned, such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo or Miguel de Cervantes. And when that history is written, if it is written, it will not only be a great history but it will be history itself. Until that time silence is more fitting to the Spanish character.

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