

## THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

*The Spanish Civil War: 1936–39*. By Paul Preston. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986. Pp. viii + 184. £10.95.

*Images of the Spanish Civil War*. Introduction by Raymond Carr. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1986. Pp. 192. £14.95.

*The Civil War in Spain*. By Raymond Carr. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986. Pp. xvii + 328. £6.95.

*El mito de la cruzada de Franco*. By Herbert R. Southworth. Barcelona: Plaza & Janes Editores S.A., 1986. Pp. 414. 1,600 pesetas.

*Cockburn in Spain*. Edited by James Pettifer. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986. Pp. 208. £4.95.

*The Signal was Spain: The Aid Spain Movement in Britain 1936–39*. By Jim Fyrth. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986. Pp. 344. £17.50 (paperback £6.95).

*The Shallow Grave: A Memoir of the Spanish Civil War*. By Walter Gregory, edited by David Morris and Anthony Peters. London: Victor Gollancz, 1986. Pp. 183. £10.95.

*Diplomacy and Strategy of Survival: British Policy and Franco's Spain, 1940–41*. By Denis Smyth. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, Pp. xi + 335. £30.

Fifty years on from the outbreak of a war which placed Spain and her elected government in the front line against the fascist advance across Europe, a veritable flood of publications evoking memories and images of her epic struggle testifies to the enduring impact of the conflict on more than one generation of non-Spaniards. That the civil war seared both the European consciousness and conscience is obvious. Yet while recalling that singular commitment to the cause of the Spanish Republic, at a distance of half a century it is also worthwhile reflecting upon the way in which the political engagement of Europe's intelligentsia has shaped not only our perception of the civil war but also of the entire Republican experience of 1930s Spain.

Presentations of the war – or rather the Republican war effort – as the 'last great cause' can obviously be criticized as exercises in facile romanticism, deriving either from boundless naivety or political calculation. Neither the war nor the 'cause' was simple. As Paul Preston points out, there was not one civil war but several, fought simultaneously. And in spite of an already massive bibliography, our appreciation of the conflict's complexity is still being significantly increased by monographical studies, the work of Spaniards and non-Spaniards alike.

More easily debunked – and most memorably by that veteran of civil war historiography, Herbert Southworth – is the Francoist myth of the war, as a latter-day catholic crusade waged against a barbarous, atheistic, 'red' republic in thrall to an exotic trinity of marxist–masonic–judaic conspirators. With scant regard for the needs of national reconciliation, this image of the war was perpetuated across the decades by an implacable victor who derived from it his ultimate legitimacy. After nearly forty years of

a regime which sought to turn historiography into a branch of state propaganda there is still much catching up to do. As Raymond Carr indicates in his preface to *The Spanish Civil War*, 'the future lies in local history'. However, it must be *history*, complete with interpretative schema, and not just the indiscriminate packaging of undigested material culled from local sources. Such 'local history' is, more often than not, the result of an archival fetish which derives, unfortunately if understandably, from long years of deprivation.

Yet in one important respect at least, as Paul Preston is careful to remind us, the idea of the civil war in Spain as the 'last great cause' still speaks to us directly today. Political romanticism and nostalgia apart, the Republican resistance between 1936 and 1939 did constitute a last ditch stand against the wave of political and economic reaction sweeping across Europe. Spain was undeniably the final attempt to halt a series of working-class defeats which, it can be argued, had begun some eighteen years previously. The period 1918–39 brought a succession of virtually uninterrupted disasters: Germany and Hungary after the First World War, the Italian left at the hands of Mussolini, dictatorships in both Spain and Portugal, the bitter experience of the general strike in Britain, the rise of Hitler and the destruction of Europe's pivotal working class, and Dollfuss' drowning of the Austrian left in blood in a civil war in miniature. Spain was thus quite reasonably seen as the last chance to halt the domino effect.

Far from being a 'poet's war' – some eighty per cent of the British contingent in the International Brigades was working class – it was a European class war in which the economically and politically dispossessed of many countries fought not only against Franco for the Spanish Republic but also for their own heritages and homelands. A growing body of personal memoir and oral history attests to this, thus countering the pervasive image of middle-class engagement. In *The Shallow Grave*, Walter Gregory's commitment to the Spanish cause emerges as an integral part of a domestic militancy which saw him involved in the 1934 hunger marches and in front line opposition to Mosley's Fascists. The bleak images of the 1920s and 1930s in Britain, juxtaposed with those of Spain, drive home the point – there were many fronts, but only one war, in 1930s Europe.

In this sense a common cause was not the product of any romantic illusion or abstraction. The men and women of the International Brigades – who had themselves first-hand experience of political and economic oppression – rightly identified with the Republic's fundamental aim genuinely to enfranchise the excluded majority by making political democracy an irreversible social and economic reality. The Spanish experience of republic and civil war has left an indelible impression: the explosion of popular political protagonism, ambitious mass cultural and educational initiatives in the loyalist zone, the international solidarity movement which grew up around the Republican war effort. The ghost of Spain's reforming ideal returns to haunt us today in Nicaragua's beleaguered revolution.

Given the intensity of the commitment of Walter Gregory, and others like him, and bearing in mind the unconditional solidarity of the circles in which they moved, the prevalent image of a quantitative as well as a qualitative British response to the Republican cause is understandable. In his introduction, Jim Fyrth rightly challenges the view that a commitment to, or empathy with, the Republican cause was the province of a social elite, a mere intellectual crusade. Nevertheless, it is vital not to fall into the trap of a facile nostalgic triumphalism when discussing British attitudes to the war. Fyrth's thesis that the dead weight of establishment history has obscured the real potential which existed for massive working-class mobilization to aid Spain is certainly

comfortingly manichean but, I would venture to suggest, equally wide of the mark. That the solidarity movement in Britain had substantial working-class support, that the efforts and sacrifices of all those mobilized were monumental and their commitment all-consuming is undeniable. But for all the stirring examples of qualitative commitment, nowhere in the book is there any hint that the base of the labour movement was massively hostile to the unheroic, parochial attitude of its leadership. A Royal Albert Hall packed to capacity cannot stand as a quantitative refutation of Orwell's claim that the majority remained demobilized. British poll results in January 1939, which revealed an increase in active support for the Republic, reflected a growing awareness of the likelihood of a European war. Concern over events in Spain remained thus largely contingent on their being perceived as of domestic relevance. As Denis Smyth points out, the same holds true for the British political establishment's attitude towards Franco. A certain ambivalence in the later stages of the conflict derived from the dawning realization that even the wholesale antirepublicanism which had constituted the basis of government policy might not be enough to secure the benevolence of Franco in the post-war period.

The intricacies of British diplomacy were, however, worlds away from the intense passion of those fighting to control the destiny of Spain. Raymond Carr's *The Civil War in Spain* – a reprint of *The Spanish Tragedy* (1977) with a new postscript – is a lucid and perceptive account of the entire Republican experience, from 1931 to 1939. As such, the study remains a consummate exposition of the war as civil war, rooted in the Spanish reality and fought, as the continuation of politics by other much bloodier means, to settle a host of issues which had been pending for over a century: notably a thoroughgoing agrarian reform and a reduction in the political power and the secular jurisdiction of the catholic church. Carr's survey of the Spanish body politic and of the country's social and economic reality in the nineteenth and early twentieth century reveals the truly staggering task of modernization and democratization which fell to the Second Republic.

The two great pillars of Nationalist Spain – the army and the church – are rigorously analysed by Carr, constituting as they did the major obstacles to reform under the Republic. While a militantly intolerant catholic church held the concept of religious, political and cultural plurality to be anathema, an equally rigid military elite possessed a political culture and moral code which, in essence, derived from Spanish catholicism at its most intransigent. Caste and faith were fused in values which descended from the age of Reconquista and Tridentine catholicism. If under the Republic an alienated church had mobilized the faithful, turning religious festivals into political demonstrations, during the war it was the catholic hierarchy's support for the military rebels which bestowed instant credibility on the crusade mythology produced by Nationalist propagandists. But Franco could not have built his religious monolith in a vacuum, and Raymond Carr presents a very clear and salutary exposition of the connexion between the free rein given to anticlerical impulses under the Republic and the consolidation of civilian – even popular – support for the Nationalist 'cause', namely the defence of a beleaguered church.

Nevertheless, it is important not to overstate the conflict between Nationalist and Loyalist Spain in terms of monolithicity versus fragmentation. As both Preston and Carr make clear, Franco too had to start by unifying his military forces, and political conflicts were by no means absent from the Nationalist camp. The real contrast between the zones lay not in the existence of political differences but in their qualitative nature and thus in the effect which they were to have upon the prosecution of the war. Of

course, the fact that conflicts in the Nationalist zone, between monarchists and falangists, and between the latter and the military were 'resolved' from above, whilst those in the Republic remained to embitter and divide, thus hampering the war effort, was the inevitable result not only of the authoritarian/democratic divide but also of the absolute irreconcilability of the major ideological differences in the Loyalist zone.

Claude Cockburn, however, does his level best to bury the political principles at stake in the Loyalists' own civil war. The image of the war presented in his dispatches as *Daily Worker* correspondent in the Republican zone constitutes a perfect example of 'last great cause' simplism; the civil war as showdown between fascism and democracy. Whilst Cockburn's reporting is intermittently moving and always colourful, the usefulness of publishing these dispatches – which essentially cover the first year of the war, from military rising to the 1937 May Days in Barcelona – at fifty years remove is less than apparent. Cockburn's line is undiluted Popular Frontism as spearheaded by the Spanish Communist party. His obsession with shopkeepers is telling in this respect (see, for example, pp. 37, 115, 152), the petite bourgeoisie being depicted as, to a man and woman, aligned with the workers against a 'little group of brutal reactionaries and traitors'. In fact, the allegiance of the Spanish middle classes was much more ambiguous, and the presentation of the rebels as a narrow fascist clique is quite untenable. The conflict was a full-scale *civil war*: one has only to cite the very substantial support secured by the right in the elections of February 1936 to appreciate the degree to which the Nationalist cause also had a popular base, and one mobilized, as we have seen, largely around a defence of the catholic faith and the social conservatism which it enshrined. Cockburn's partisan approach was the logical result of the fact that his dispatches were primarily intended to serve as propaganda. He was concerned to export a vision of the Republican war effort acceptable to the western democracies in a desperate attempt to end non-intervention and make a reality of Stalin's vision of collective security. However, the war has now long since been won and lost. In 1986 the value of such a publication must surely depend on the provision of a context which demonstrates, or at least makes reference to, the contrast between the neatness of Popular Front as a theoretical construct and its inadequacy – even inappropriateness – given the reality of the civil conflict in Spain. As it is, the editor has provided almost nothing by way of introductory information or other critical apparatus to enable the general reader to set Cockburn's presentation of the Spanish Communist party's line against the contradictions and ambiguities thrown up by the war.

The bitter ideological division in the Loyalist zone derived in essence from a conflict over the objectives of the war. Whether the Loyalists opted for a revolutionary war effort or a conventional one, since means radically change ends, so the choice would absolutely determine the nature of post-war society. The 'revolution versus war' debate, which rent the Loyalist forces during the first half of the conflict, has dominated ever since, in some shape or form, the vast output of historical writing on the Republic at war. Whilst this is understandable, given both the magnetism of the ideas involved and the violent consequences of the political division, by emphasizing ideology to such a degree, a crucial fact has been obscured: the dynamic of the struggle between socialists, communists and anarchists derived equally from organizational rivalry. It was a struggle for political *power*, for bodies as much as minds, in a period of mass politicization. This is the incontrovertible evidence of the party archives.

Largo Caballero, the veteran socialist trade union leader and prime minister between September 1936 and May 1937, opposed the Spanish Communist party (PCE) not because it was curtailing the revolution in its drive towards centralization and the

emulation of Franco's *mando único* (a single military and political command), but because the party had its heart set on the conquest of his own socialist rank and file. To be sure, the aggressive tactics, political high-handedness and self-righteous attitude of the Communist party during the civil war alienated socialists as much as anarchists, but, at root, the PCE's objective, in terms of the centralization of all political, military and economic power in the hands of the Loyalist government, was increasingly widely accepted as the war went on, and nowhere more so than among rank and file workers. Socialist opposition to the PCE increased apace throughout 1938 but, in the main, it was for reasons of political practice, not principle.

The overly 'ideological' image of the Republic at war stems directly from the fact that the vast majority of the published material available – and this in Spanish as much as English – tends to create the impression that, once the anarchist barricades came down in Barcelona in May 1937, then the war was over. It had, in fact, run less than half its course. The Republic went on to resist for almost another two years. The history of this period has still to be written – as much at national as at local level. The former hinges very considerably on an investigation of the premiership of reformist socialist Juan Negrin. It was his prodigious effort – a mixture of extraordinary will and practical political expertise – which fired the Republican resistance in the bleakest of international climates, with appeasement in the ascendant. His understanding of the Nationalist mentality – that the notion of compromise was alien to the avowed intent to eradicate 'error' – led him tirelessly to proclaim the need for continued resistance as, paradoxically, the only route to genuine peace. The cruder notions of Negrin's communist subservience, which fed upon the bitterness of exile and were later reinforced by the credo of the cold war, have been laid to rest. But a full appraisal of the Republic at war remains impossible until such time as Negrin's personal archive is made accessible to historians of the period.

In spite of an existing civil war bibliography of some fifteen thousand books, there are still considerable gaps in our knowledge. If we are to progress, however, we must be careful both to enshrine and celebrate the Republican ideal but bury deep any ideologically simplistic versions of the mythology of the 'last great cause'.

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