

LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

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MEXICO AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR. By THOMAS G. POWELL. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981. Pp. 210. \$17.50.)
THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR, 1936–1939: AMERICAN HEMISPHERIC PERSPECTIVES. Edited by MARK FALCOFF and FREDRICK B. PIKE. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982. Pp. 357. \$21.95.)

If there was little consensus among Spaniards on the origins, significance, and aims of the Spanish Civil War, even less agreement existed outside of Spain, although foreigners tended to simplify the complex domestic conflict in order to render it congruent with their own political perspectives. The “lessons” of the war were thus multiple and often contradictory. For observers like Virginia Woolf, the pictures of “dead bodies and ruined houses” issuing from Spain demanded renewed opposition to the horror and senselessness of war.¹ For others, including the sixty thousand foreigners who fought in the International Brigades, the moral imperatives of the struggle superseded the pacifism inherited from the postwar generation.² For Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, the Spanish conflict presented an opportunity to further their diplomatic objectives, whereas for the majority of European statesmen, it was a diplomatic nightmare that threatened to draw the Continent into another world war. In the eyes of many, the war was thus the first great testing ground between “democracy” and “fascism,” a test that democracy ominously failed. For still others, the aerial bombardments of urban centers and civilian populations symbolized the frightening assault of modern technology on the familiar values of a simpler world. For Latin Americans, the Spanish Civil War appeared as a conflict between the proponents of “tradition” and “modernity,” or between two alternative paths to modernity, and it was thus a reference point for domestic quarrels over the same issues.

These diverse responses to the Spanish Civil War have suggested in turn a variety of approaches to the study of its international impact. A number of historians have examined the diplomacy of the war and the relative contributions of foreign powers to the two sides. But no defini-

tive study can be written until greater use has been made of Spanish archival sources, some of which have only recently been opened to researchers (such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, opened in 1977); others remain closed (such as the Ministry of War, although the holdings on the 'War of Liberation' in the Military Historical Service in Madrid are accessible).³ Public opinion—and the shaping of that opinion through propaganda—have been the subject of several recent monographs.⁴ But far fewer studies have attempted to explore the links between opinion, interest-group politics, and diplomacy, or to analyze in an extended way the impact of the war on the domestic politics of other nations. This level of analysis is precisely what would make intelligible the profound impression that the war made—and continues to make—on public opinion. No matter what the approach, only the major European powers and the United States have received significant attention. Latin American responses to or involvement in the Spanish conflict have been almost completely neglected.

As the two works under review here make clear, this neglect is not entirely surprising because that involvement was in most instances minimal. Latin American governments, with the exception of Mexico, played a minor role in the diplomacy of the war; relatively few Latin Americans fought as individuals on either side. Interest in the war was high only among the educated classes, who divided for the most part along predictable lines of cleavage. Yet despite their generally unremarkable findings, both volumes offer insights into the protean character of the war when viewed from divergent political and social vantage points. They also suggest a number of areas for further research and comparison.

The premise of *The Spanish Civil War, 1936–39: American Hemispheric Perspectives* is that Latin American responses to the Spanish Civil War differed from those in Europe and the United States because many of the issues that gave rise to the war existed in equally virulent form in Latin America. Although this contention may well be true, the essays in this volume do not substantiate it because with the exception of Mark Falcoff and Alistair Hennessy, none of the authors seems to have a very clear idea about the origins or nature of the conflict in Spain. The Spanish Civil War they refer to is the war as it existed in the propaganda of the left and the right in the Latin American nations. While this approach is adequate to study domestic ideological conflicts and their impact on foreign policy, it does not permit an analysis of the reality behind the propaganda or a comparison of the issues in Spain and America.

The introductory essay on Spain and the United States by coeditor Fredrick Pike does nothing to clarify matters because the level of his argument is so abstract and his language so imprecise that one is left wondering what the war was all about. For example, Pike first argues that the war involved the defenders and critics of "modernity," but some-

what later he insists that nearly all, on both the left and the right, were critics of modernity and proponents of “corporatism,” a catchall term that for Pike variously means “interest-group politics” (in the sense suggested by Charles Maier⁵) or “communalism” (as advocated by anarchosyndicalists, socialists, Catholic traditionalists, and Falangists). The ideological conflicts that divided Spaniards in the thirties are thus totally obscured. Pike suggests that monarchism and religion primarily determined the line-up in the war, but as he concedes (in the endnotes), there were numerous exceptions to this rule on both sides. Nowhere does Pike mention the deep structural imbalances in Spanish society, conflicts over land reform, or civil-military tensions. He thereby reduces the Spanish Civil War to a war of ideas that had no anchor in sociopolitical reality, but that served merely as the instruments of resentful “elites and would-be elites”—intellectuals who manipulated the masses to satisfy their cravings for power and to preserve their threatened status. Such an interpretation isolates a single element in a complex struggle, denies the legitimacy of the social and political issues at stake in Spain, and makes impossible comparisons between Spain and the nations discussed in the other essays. Pike’s discussion of public opinion in the United States, on the other hand, is occasionally insightful, if marred by the same disdain for “intellectuals” and by his obvious distaste for the Spanish Republic.

Professor Pike’s chapter is followed by one on Mexico by Thomas G. Powell. Because it is a summary of Powell’s monograph, which is also under review here, I will deal with it later in this review.

Alistair Hennessy’s essay on Cuba, based exclusively on secondary sources, modestly and successfully identifies areas for further research and somewhat less successfully suggests some comparisons between the Spanish and Cuban revolutions. His principal conclusion is that the Spanish Civil War facilitated the rapprochement between Fulgencio Batista and the Cuban Communist party in 1937 and served as the training ground for the participants in the bloody struggles of the 1940s and 1950s in Cuba. Hennessy also discusses with sensitivity the significance of the war for Cuban literature.

According to David Bushnell, in Colombia the Spanish Republic found its strongest supporter, after Mexico. In view of the fact that Colombia failed to provide any significant support either during or after the war (for reasons not fully explained by the author), this assessment is an eloquent measure of the degree of the republic’s diplomatic isolation. Despite the claim in his introductory paragraph that the “Spanish struggle had a powerful effect because the issues it posed and the circumstances out of which it developed so closely paralleled the situation of the New World nation itself,” Bushnell actually demonstrates the opposite: the Colombian struggle differed in kind and degree from that in

Spain, and the war was of relatively minor import in determining Colombian political alignments.

In contrast, the Peruvian political configuration in the 1930s described by Thomas M. Davies, Jr., resembled the Spanish situation in several crucial respects. Like the Republican coalition of 1931, APRA represented the challenge of the middle class and the organized working class to the traditional elites; as in Spain, the Peruvian military ultimately seized power to restore the traditional social and political order. Although I do not believe that General Franco was initially as intent on economic modernization as his Peruvian counterpart, General Oscar Benavides, the Davies essay suggests that a careful comparison of civil-military relations in Spain and Latin America might prove instructive.

Praetorianism is also the focus of the concluding section of Paul W. Drake's essay on Chile. Chile bore greater resemblance to Spain in the 1970s than in the 1930s, when the Spanish Civil War aroused few passions other than encouraging the ruling elites to make strategic concessions in order to co-opt or placate the opposition. Although Drake's inaccurate characterization of the Spanish Popular Front weakens his attempt to compare it to the Chilean Popular Front, his essay suggests that the greatest difference between Chile and Spain in the 1930s was the greater flexibility and pragmatism of the Chilean right.

The last essay in the volume, that of Mark Falcoff on Argentina, should have been placed first because it is exemplary in its clarity, elegance, and intelligence. Of all the essayists, Falcoff seems to understand best the political and cultural significance of the Spanish Second Republic, and he contrasts it brilliantly with the contemporary Argentine experience to explain why the Spanish Civil War came to have deep repercussions in the American republic. His chapter is a model of the way in which a brief essay can identify and address basic issues while suggesting to receptive minds further areas for investigation.

Most of these essays, with the proper framework, might easily be expanded to monographic length. For no country is this observation truer than for Mexico, the American republic most deeply involved in the Spanish struggle and the only nation apart from the Soviet Union to send official aid to the Spanish Republic. Yet Thomas Powell's *Mexico and the Spanish Civil War* is a disappointment. According to his preface, the author's purpose was to "fill a gap in Mexican historiography" and to examine objectively the "patriotic myth" of Mexican support for the Republic. By failing to ask more interesting questions, Powell has produced a carelessly written and argued book that misses most of its opportunities.

Powell's argument is that under irresponsible and demagogic leadership, both Spain and Mexico were led to the brink of civil war in the 1930s, the loyalty of the army to the Partido Nacional Revolucionario

in Mexico accounting for the disparate outcomes. Against the will of a majority of Mexicans, Lázaro Cárdenas persisted in supporting the Spanish Republic materially and diplomatically, both because of his leftist sympathies and because of his desire to take a principled public stand against foreign intervention in the internal affairs of other nations. Once the war was over, he extended a welcome to thousands of Spanish refugees, again over the protests of many Mexicans but to the ultimate cultural benefit of the nation. In time the dissenters dropped their opposition, and the legend of Mexican aid to the Republic became part of the sustaining mythology of Mexico's governing party. The defense of the Republic, which "cast little glory on the country," now serves as a source of national unity and pride.

The book is animated by a profound antipathy to the Spanish Republic, which Powell misleadingly characterizes as undemocratic and by 1936 "drenched in blood." He equates the rather mild anticlericalism of the Republic with the much more radical persecution under Calles and suggests that moderate and conservative Mexicans viewed events in Spain between 1931 and 1936 with alarm because they feared that Mexico would follow a similar path. Powell provides no evidence for this assertion, however, and it seems more likely that conservative Spaniards believed their country to be following the Mexican example. What his evidence clearly shows is that supporters and opponents of the Cárdenas regime distorted the issues in Spain to serve their own political ends. Powell might usefully have examined how and for what internal political ends these distortions took place, but his analysis of policy issues in the Cárdenas years is skimpy. The depiction of Cárdenas himself is contradictory. First unmasking him as a pseudorevolutionary whose paternalism and authoritarianism likened him to General Franco, Powell later characterizes him as a demagogic leftist. Cárdenas's domestic policies, except for his anticlericalism, receive no attention, although a comparison of land reform legislation, civil-military relations, or other issues in Republican Spain and Revolutionary Mexico might have led to some interesting conclusions.

The central chapters of the book discuss Mexican aid to the Republic and the impact of the war on Mexican public opinion. Here Powell's argument is enriched by his extensive use of Mexican diplomatic archives and the Mexican press, but he misses the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing debate about the amount of aid the Republic received from foreign sources by failing to estimate the total amounts of money or arms sent from Mexico. It is clear, however, that Cárdenas's ability to aid the Republic was severely limited by the difficulty of finding arms, in Mexico or abroad, for transshipment to Spain, by Mexico's diplomatic isolation (and her bungling diplomatic representatives), and by the divisions within Mexican public opinion with regard to the war. In

gauging that opinion, Powell focuses almost entirely on the opposition press, which was pro-Franco but not “fascist.” Powell neither discusses the interests represented by the great urban dailies nor attempts to analyze their role in the formation of policy. Nor does he examine the way in which the government marshalled public support for its foreign policy, nor the connections between that policy and its domestic interests. The result is little more than a rehash of the various ideological viewpoints expressed in the press.

In his concluding chapter, Powell analyzes the function of the “myth” of Mexican aid within the official ideology of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional. But he fails to tackle the most interesting question: how that “myth”—if indeed it is a myth—was elaborated and communicated in the years after the Spanish Civil War. Intent on exposing the legend, Powell neglects the historical process through which it took shape.

Taken as a whole, these two volumes raise a number of issues common to Spain and America that might be profitably explored by historians willing to take on the difficult tasks of comparative history, including the secularization of education and culture, civil-military relations, and mass mobilization. In addition, the debate over diplomatic asylum (skillfully analyzed in general terms by Falcoff), the outlook and loyalty of the diplomatic corps, and the structure and function of the small, but commercially significant, Spanish enclaves in the American republics emerge in most of these studies as topics worthy of further investigation. A major “lesson” to be learned from them all is that successful comparative history requires more than passing familiarity with the sources for each country involved if oversimplifications are to be avoided and significant theoretical issues addressed.

NOTES

1. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York, 1966).
2. Andreu Castells, *Las Brigadas Internacionales en la guerra de España* (Barcelona, 1974) is the best study of the International Brigades. For a study of two English volunteers, see Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *Journey to the Frontier: Two Roads to the Spanish Civil War* (New York, 1970).
3. An attempt to summarize foreign intervention in Spain is Jesús Salas Larrazábal, *La intervención extranjera en la guerra de España* (Madrid, 1974); see also Ramón Salas Larrazábal, *Los datos exactos de la guerra civil* (Madrid, 1980). A partial list of diplomatic studies might include Norman J. Padelford, *International Law and Diplomacy in the Spanish Civil Strife* (New York, 1939); David T. Cattell, *Society Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War* (New York, 1957); Richard P. Traina, *American Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War* (Bloomington, Ind., 1968); Hans-Henning Abendroth, *Hitler in der spanischen Arena* (Schöningh, 1973); John F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War* (Princeton, N.J., 1975); Angel Viñas, *El oro español en la guerra civil* (Madrid, 1976) and *La Alemania nazi y el 18 de julio*, 2nd ed. (Madrid, 1977); Anthony Adamthwaite, *France and the Coming of the Second World War, 1936–1939* (London, 1977); and Jill Edwards, *The British Government and the Spanish Civil War* (London, 1979).

4. See Allen Guttman, *The Wound in the Heart: America and the Spanish Civil War* (New York, 1962); K. W. Watkins, *Britain Divided: The Effect of the Spanish Civil War on British Political Opinion* (London, 1963); David W. Pike, *Les Français et la Guerre d'Espagne, 1936–1939* (Paris, 1975); Herbert R. Southworth, *Guernica! Guernica! A Study of Journalism, Diplomacy, Propaganda, and History* (Berkeley, 1977); and Anthony Aldgate, *Cinema and History: British Newsreels and the Spanish Civil War* (London, 1979).
5. Charles S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in France, Germany, and Italy in the Decade after World War I* (Princeton, 1975).