



The Spanish Civil War: A Never-ending Fascination

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Alfredo González Ruibal: *Volver a las trincheras: Una arqueología de la Guerra Civil Española*. Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 2016. 352 pp.

Daniel Oviedo Silva & Alejandro Pérez-Olivares García, eds.: *Madrid, una ciudad en guerra (1936-1948)*. Madrid, Los Libros de la Catarata, 2016. 264 pp.

Despite the tens of thousands of books and articles written on the Spanish Civil War, these two volumes demonstrate the continuing vitality of the scholarship on that conflict. For generations, the historiography was overwhelmingly political and diplomatic, but more recently, cultural history—often with a strong political inflection—has posed new questions and promoted different areas of investigation. Presently, social history, which was never completely absent, has begun to compete for attention. Both books under review examine fresh topics, and both question the conventional periodization of the conflict, 1936-1939, by extending its endpoint well into the 1940s and even into early 1950s. The enduring repression of the Franco regime more than justifies the extension.

By undertaking the first archeological monograph, to my knowledge, devoted to the Spanish war, Alfredo González Ruibal has provided fresh information and insights. Since the 1970s many archeologists—like social historians—have decided to research “las personas olvidadas por la historia hegemónica (mujeres, esclavos, colonizados, obreros)” (p. 146). Considering the conflict from an archeological perspective moves scholars away from political and diplomatic history and towards everyday social and economic experiences of average folks on the killing fields of the front, rear, and in penal institutions. González’ book is based upon excavations conducted by his team throughout Spain beginning in 2006. The team’s persistence overcame the legacy of *franquista* policies that removed war ruins, and its tenacity surmounted bureaucratic obstacles, especially those imposed by the Generalitat in Catalonia. The author makes the indisputable point that the civil war contained many different wars—major battles, quiet fronts, massive political assassinations and detentions.

The author provides interesting background and context in his examination of philanthropic and progressive Gallegan emigrants who funded schools, homes,

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parks, and other institutions that Catholics and Falangists seized to use them to indoctrinate young people or converted them into prisons. His exhumations confirm that the opening six months of the war saw the bloodiest political repression in both zones. However, Republicans were more willing to investigate the murders and prosecute assassins than Nationalists. The latter were also more likely to kill women than the former. The IV Batallón de Montaña no. 7 de Arapiles de la VI Brigada de Navarra engaged in a drunken orgy of rape and massacre in Valdediós (Asturias) where approximately 10 nurses and 7 hospital personnel were mercilessly executed. Franco's African forces were especially brutal with Republican women and also children, including infants. The author shows how the executed were humiliated in death by the denial of proper burial. Those eliminated in the Nationalist zone were often short and had bad or few teeth, indicating their low socio-economic status. Orthopedic evidence indicated that most had engaged in hard physical labor. In other words, they resembled classic proletarians, whose humanity the author's description and analysis restores. González reveals several surprises: a significant minority of the assassinated in the Nationalist zone—7 of 81 in Costaján—wore or carried religious objects, as did a few deceased Republican soldiers. To accomplish their repugnant task, a good number of killers consumed alcoholic beverages. They sometimes murdered entire occupational groups, as exhumations have located collective graves of railroad workers and even mayors. The diggers also found wedding rings. At the end of the conflict Republican soldiers abandoned their worthless pesetas.

The Nationalist rapid advance to the gates of Madrid is attributed not to the failure of Republican fortifications and pillboxes (*fortines*), whose construction was highly professional, but rather to the militiamen's lack of discipline and the government's failure to coordinate defenses. The author shows how the Republicans conducted their literally underground war to defend successfully the capital, even using the books from the university's library to reinforce their parapets. This function showed "físicamente que la pluma puede ser más poderosa que la espada" (p. 88). Although many historians claim the Spanish Civil War prefigured the Second World War, the author demonstrates that archeologically it was much closer to the First World War given its trench systems and weapons, which often outdated by the late 1930s. In particular, the Battle of the Ebro recalled the Great War, even if the Spanish combatants were more poorly equipped and, on the Republican side, less well fed. González discloses the importance of corrals (*parideras*), which became fortified nuclei of resistance around which Nationalists constructed trenches and bomb shelters and effectively resisted Republican attacks on numerous occasions. Insurgent fortifications were usually far superior in construction and operation to their Republican counterparts. Their graffiti demonstrated a cult of the leader (Franco, of course) absent from the enemy. Unlike World War I, the author shows convincingly that Spanish soldiers suffered more casualties from sickness and disease, including malaria, than from battle wounds.

"Quizá los arqueólogos, por deformación profesional, seamos más receptivos a las cosas viejas que nuestros colegas historiadores" (p. 95). Archeology exposes the importance of canned goods, especially as the war endured, in nourishing the troops. Condensed milk, tinned vegetables, canned tuna, and, of course, sardines were the main staples, the "menu de mochila" (p. 175). Republicans suffered from the lack of fresh food significantly more than Nationalists who were even able to supply their men in Belchite with mussels (*mejillones*) from the Gallegan coast. Towards

the end of the conflict, Nationalist soldiers consumed *carajillos* as *digestivos*. The author confirms the superiority of Nationalist logistics: “La comida [de los soldados de Franco] no era ni mala ni escasa: la abundancia de carne, de hecho, debía ser una novedad para muchos soldados, porque en la España de preguerra las proteínas animales eran una rareza en la dieta de las clases populares” (p. 124). The protein was accompanied by soda, beer, wine, brandy, and *jerez*. The last constituted “la droga de los franquistas” (p. 175). In contrast, according to the Peruvian poet César Vallejo, a strong supporter of the Republic, the Republican diet was the “migaja al cinto” (p. 118). Indeed, González Ruibal ratifies that above average supplies of food and drink signaled to ordinary Republican soldiers that the high command would soon order them to undertake an offensive. Archeological digs also disclose that Republicans had a greater diversity of weapons, which resulted in difficulties of supplying suitable ammunition. “También es probable que los soldados republicanos dispararan menos que los sublevados” (p. 101). Nevertheless, Republican artillery sometimes proved to be effective, especially in the mountains where it could produce deadly ricochets of splinters of stone. Archeology, the author laments, has more to say about violence than peace. Nevertheless, he shows the primitive nature of much of the footwear of both armies, for example, sandals made from used tires. The author conveys the pervasive boredom of the many quiet fronts.

While there is no doubt that his work is an important contribution to Spanish Civil War studies, the author sometimes fails to provide proper context. He seems to accept at face value the “democratic” nature of the Second Republic (p. 30, 245). He also tends to equate politically (but not militarily) the Spanish Civil War with the Second World War, although the latter avoided the clear revolutionary vs. counter-revolutionary struggle until after the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe in 1944-45. Furthermore, I am unsure whether Hannah Arendt’s analysis of totalitarianism is applicable to Franco’s Spain since the latter’s counterrevolutionary violence appears closer to that of the Russian Whites and Finnish rightists than to Soviet Communists or German National Socialists. The author’s argument situates the beginning of the civil war in July 1936: “Aqueológicamente, está claro cuándo comenzó la guerra. La disciplina registra, con la precisión de un sismógrafo, el temblor de 1936, que no fue solo político, social y militar. También lo fue material: el terremoto dejó grietas en forma de trincheras, fosas comunes, fortines, campamentos militares, ciudades en ruinas y campos de concentración. El paisaje de España solo comienza a transformarse con esta gran ruptura del verano del 36” (p. 40). This statement ignores the hundreds of destroyed religious edifices, land occupations, and workers’ strikes that followed the victory of the Popular Front in the spring of 1936. He is correct to argue that a larger number of more influential Republicans opposed “eliminacionismo” more earnestly than their Nationalist counterparts; however, given Paracuellos and other massacres, the author may exaggerate by concluding that “el eliminacionismo revolucionario fracasó” (p. 65). He does not acknowledge Republican governmental complicity in the assassination of thousands of rightists in Madrid (see the remarks below on Fernando Jiménez Herrera, “Detrás del ‘Terror Rojo’: Los comités madrileños durante el verano-otoño de 1936,”). Nor does González seem to consider sufficiently the massive recycling of captured Republican soldiers into the Nationalist army.

He is justly critical of the Republican army for executing its deserters and compares it unfavorably to the United States military which shot only one soldier who

refused to fight. Yet the Americans and, for that matter, the British could be more generous with their disobedient troops since their Soviet ally was taking the overwhelming majority of the casualties on the European theater. To avoid the massive Allied casualties, the Americans had recourse to their lethal atomic weaponry which ended the war in Asia in 1945. The author has an overly negative view of Allied strategic bombing in Europe during World War II, which accomplished several essential goals. First, it fulfilled the political and military mission of offering a second front to both the Soviet leadership and Allied public opinion and therefore avoided a premature continental invasion which, if it had been unsuccessful, might have changed the course of the conflict. Second, it effectively disrupted German (and French) production and transportation, especially in the petroleum sector. Finally, unlike World War I, massive bombing brought the war very early to German soil and thus prepared that nation for its unconditional surrender in 1945. Given the visible destruction and total occupation of their country, no “stab-in-the-back” legend was credibly resurrected in the post-World War II period. Like an equally devastated Japan, Germany renounced revenge.

González declares that the Franco regime treated *guerrilleros* worse than criminals, and the author laments that “mientras en Francia la Resistencia ha pasado a la memoria colectiva nacional como ejemplo patriótico de la lucha contra el fascismo, en España los guerrilleros han permanecido ocultos en fosas anónimas y su memoria tergiversada” (p. 264). Yet he fails to consider that the French Resistance was able by the end of World War II to create a broad antifascist coalition of the left and right that Spanish Republicans and *antifranquistas* never achieved.

This volume extends the periodization of the civil war by showing that Spaniards collected and sold metals and munitions found on the battlefields as prices of scrap metals skyrocketed during World War II. The construction of “casas-cuartel” (p. 262) after the Spanish conflict sent the population a message of intimidation and “totalitarian” control. Nevertheless, the regime slowly transitioned from a fascistic ideology to a more traditional “nacional-católico” stance in 1942 when it adopted a system of “redención” (p. 268) which allowed prisoners in the literally hundreds of detention centers to labor to lessen their sentences. Similarly, it abandoned “totalitarian” methods of punishment and sought to return to the nineteenth-century prison, “la maquina de castigar” (p. 286). In crowded and unheated establishments, the detained were often kept on the verge of starvation and forced to share their small can of sardines or tuna with their fellow inmates. Thus, it is not surprising that a significant number were stricken with tuberculosis. Yet the numerous combs and mirrors which archeologists have uncovered show prisoners’ desires to maintain personal dignity and thus to resist the dehumanization which characterized the concentration camp system during the period of the Second World War.

Ultimately, this is a beautiful book. Its numerous maps, photographs, and illustrations are both attractive and informative and reveal much about a war that continues to fascinate Spaniards and foreigners alike. It offers a *longue durée* perspective which few history books can match: “la exploración de la paridera y la cerrada, donde se refugiaron los soldados sublevados, suministró cerca de 2,000 piezas.... Esta abundancia en sí misma es ya una lección sobre la naturaleza de la modernidad y de sus conflictos: un combate entre 300 soldados hace mil años apenas habría dejado huella en el paisaje” (p. 173).

Historians will be more familiar with the perspectives and methods of the edited collection of essays on Madrid during the “long” civil war which terminated only when the *estado de guerra* was lifted in 1948. The first chapter by Fernando Jiménez Herrera, “Detrás del ‘Terror Rojo’: Los comités madrileños durante el verano-otoño de 1936,” capably explores the relationship between leftist militants who engaged in terror in Madrid and the Spanish state which struggled to recover its monopoly on violence. Although the state was able to restore some of its authority after 1937, the committees which administered repressive “justice” remained active. As the author shows, the relationship of the committees of the parties and unions of the Popular Front with the government was not always hostile, and the committees and the government cooperated to repress those perceived as “fascists.” “Se oficializó de esta manera la violencia revolucionaria” (p. 49). The state institutionalized revolutionary violence. “Bajo la premisa de eliminar a la sublevación y en nombre de la República o de la revolución, no solo fueron detenidas aquellas personas que política o socialmente estuvieron involucradas en la rebelión, sino también todos aquellos que formaban parte de colectivos o estratos sociales afines a la misma: la Iglesia, el ejército, miembros de familias adineradas de clase alta, pero también obreros de sindicatos amarillos ... de partidos de derechas ... o algunos profesionales de clase media” (p. 54). At the same time, cooperation occurred among Communists, socialists, and anarchists who established various *comités de defensa*, *abastos*, and *cultura* in various urban neighborhoods and villages in Madrid province. Jiménez focuses especially on the Comité Villa de Vallecas and the ayuntamiento del Puente del Puente de Vallecas.

Although the Communists publicly emphasized winning the war and downplaying the revolution, I think it is a mistake to conclude that the PCF was anti- or counter-revolutionary, as the author implies. Jiménez shows that Paul Preston is incorrect to have attributed political assassinations to common criminals rather than to leftist militants, including Communists and socialists, who wished to *limpiar* the rear of enemies and promote revolution. It might be added that Preston also exaggerates the role of anarchists in the executions. After the initial months of bloodletting, the Republican state was able to integrate violent and potentially violent working-class activists into its administration and thereby to limit murders.

Carlos Píriz, “Miedo: Reflexiones teóricas y metodológicas sobre la Quinta Columna en la ciudad de Madrid,” explores the burgeoning fears in the capital during the conflict. As the humorist Luis Bagaría wrote in February 1937:

--Dígame, Pepín: ¿en qué se parece Dios a la Quinta Columna?

--En que, según dicen, está en todas partes.

Suspicion particularly flourished in the urban setting of Madrid where the underground organization of the Falange Española was active clandestinely.

The author convincingly concludes that the difficulty of analyzing collective fears has resulted in a major historiographical omission. Yet he might have referenced more closely the work of Julius Ruiz, *The Red Terror and the Spanish Civil War: Revolutionary Violence in Madrid*, (Cambridge University Press, 2014) which has analyzed the Fifth Column in Madrid.

Ainhoa Campos Posada, “Resistir es fácil con la tripa llena: Escasez y derrotismo en el Madrid de la Guerra Civil,” states appropriately, “el estudio de la violencia ha atraído la atención de los historiadores, pero el resto de aspectos de la retaguardia

no lo han hecho” (p. 99). In response to this omission, she adopts a social historical perspective that deepens the study of hunger in the capital. The author innovatively investigates the role of women in the urban food crisis, many of whom wanted the war to end quickly—regardless of the victor—“para evitar morir de hambre” (p. 103). Countless *madrileños* were disturbed by the arrival of refugees who competed with them for scarce supplies. The reluctance of peasants to trade their produce for the devalued Republican *peseta* forced some to barter cherished personal possessions for survival. Smokers satisfied their addiction by collecting cigarette butts (*colillas*) from the streets. Counterproductive censorship that prohibited honest reporting of scarcities discredited the controlled media and promoted the defeatism that it was designed to combat. “Defeatism” became a crime that exposed its perpetrators to a long sentence in Republican work camps. In the city, even veteran leftists came to believe—generally accurately—that the “fascists” ate better than antifascists, one of the *franquistas* most substantial arguments. Shortages increased tensions over distribution of scarce commodities, and officers of the Ejército Popular were suspected of siphoning goods to their friends or into their own pockets. Campos Posada significantly adds to our knowledge of a central problem of the Republican war effort.

Jesús Espinosa Romero, “La Delegación del Estado para la Recuperación de Documentos en Madrid,” examines the *franquista* collection and classification of papers, many of which eventually found their way to the Civil War archive in Salamanca. By examining the documents confiscated by the regime, the author reveals its obsessions: leftist organizations and their media, Ejército Popular, bookstores, and any individual suspected of disloyalty. It would have been interesting for the author and his readers to reflect upon the historical meanings of the various name changes of the Salamanca archive, which is currently called Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica, even if this would have taken the chapter beyond the chronological range of the volume.

Daniel Oviedo Silva, “Juro por Dios y declaro por mi honor’: Verdad, impostura y estrategias autoexculpatorias en las declaraciones de la posguerra madrileña,” innovatively focuses on the *porteros* and *porteras* by examining their immediate postwar testimony in military trials. During the war, these well-placed individuals obtained powers of life and death over the residents of their buildings. Their denunciations, complicity, and silences could save or condemn suspected “fascists.” “Parece, por lo tanto, que tanto los porteros que perjudicaron a sus vecinos como los que los protegieron estuvieron bien representados en el Madrid bélico” (p. 187). The postwar period introduced a new period of justice or revenge where *porteros* often found themselves on the defensive. The author’s close reading of their testimony and those of their fellow residents show the difficulty of establishing general truths about their guilt or innocence.

Alba Fernández Gallego, “Donde habita el olvido”: La apropiación de la Colina de los Chopos en el Nuevo Madrid científico (1939-1948),” considers the history of Spanish science from a fresh spatial perspective. At the beginning of the twentieth century the Colina de los Chopos became the center of Spanish science, whose relative backwardness made it highly indebted to foreign models. The author attributes this *atraso* to traditionalists’ and conservatives’ suspicion of modernity. The victory of National Catholicism in 1939 reinforced the rupture with liberal intellectuals. Yet the spatial continuity between the liberal and conservative scientific establishments persisted during the Franco regime and revealed a contested but common intellec-

tual legacy: “Si paseamos por la Colina de los Chopos no podemos ver únicamente un colegio, un centro de investigación o una iglesia. Debemos ver a través de esos muros para comprender cuáles son realmente los cimientos sobre los que se asientan, cuál es su origen, qué supone que esas instituciones ocupen ese espacio y no otro” (p. 258).

All authors mentioned have made stimulating and often significant contributions to Spanish Civil War historiography. Most have moved away from the traditional political and diplomatic approaches that have dominated the literature for decades. Even when a few engage in political history, their local studies deepen our understanding. All have based their work on primary sources –whether documents or everyday objects– that have never been previously analyzed. The results are valuable.