

The Spanish Civil War

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I recall a visit to a restaurant around Columbia in the middle or so of the 70's. I was sitting by an elderly colleague¹ and his wife, and somehow it came up that I had visited Spain a few years earlier with my then girlfriend. This shocked them no end. How could one visit Spain under Franco? I certainly was made to feel ashamed, but failed to comply so fully. To me the Spanish Civil War was remote history, but to them a defining experience of their youth, just as the Vietnam war was to prove to be to my own contemporaries.

In order for Wars to make sense there has to be a sharp delineation between the good and the bad, between friend and foe. In fact war is possible only when there is a clear demonized concept of an enemy. Many armed conflicts fail to generate this black and whiteness in detached observers, and hence appear as rather confused and pointless affairs of reckless suffering and wanton destruction. The Spanish Civil War does still seventy years later continue to present this clear demarcation, perhaps because, as Beevor points out, that unlike most histories, it got to be written by its losers. And as the losers included a very articulate segment, namely that of leading western intellectuals, the opportunity was not wasted. Thus when it comes to taking sides, there is usually no problem of choice.

It is not easy to understand its sources, nor its unfolding for that matter, technical attempts of explication invariably get entangled in an alphabet soup of various acronyms, each standing for various socialist fractions, but let us anyway attempt a brief sketch.

Spain had a brief and glorious history after its final re-emergence from Islamic occupation at the end of the fifteenth century². In fact as such it constituted the first territorial setback from the point of view of Islam, and consequently it became associated with Catholic revival during the time of reformation, involving the Inquisition and the Jesuits. It was a heavy-handed dominant power, which found itself at the right place at the right time at the rapid expansion of the known world during the middle of the millennium, engaging in ruthless colonial exploitation and hoarding overseas treasures. But the symbols of power and wealth, should not be confused by power and wealth themselves, and thus by the 18th century it had already turned into a European irrelevancy, and by its loss of colonial possessions in the beginning of the 19th century, it closed into itself as a poor and insignificant peripheral entity, with an indigenous peninsular population far less than that of which it had been able to boast during its heydays. The church was strong allied to a thin landowning elite, and the majority of the population was oppressed and starving, and the country as a whole was suffering from governmental ineptitude. In short the equivalent of an aristocratic family coming down in the world, retaining nothing more tangible than the pride in the sweetness of glorious memories. Spain came late to the

¹ In fact Kolchin famed for his differential algebra

² This was a process that took centuries, the Moors at Granada being the last remnants of a Muslim empire

modern world, and when it did so at the end of that century, it embraced socialists ideas with a vengeance, not so much Marx as his anarchist rival Bakunin, and what emerged was what contemporary observers termed a genuine workers movement. The monarchy was not surprisingly jettisoned and a Republic ensued, with a rather tumultuous and confused initial phase until a Popular Front asserted itself winning a majority at the polls. This, which might have been seen as the stabilization of an incipient democratic process, instead turned into a crisis which resulted in its total dismantling.

What we have are the dark forces of reaction. The Catholic church above all, which claimed a very strong hold on the society as well as on the souls who constituted it, but which, according to Beevor, actually enjoyed very little direct support, the majority of Spaniards being quite indifferent, not to say hostile, to its influence. The land-owners of course, and the army, and maybe a few wealthy industrialists, the forces of capitalism not automatically being on the side of reaction, but as likely to inspire its contempt and hostility as its support. But in addition to those obvious ones there were also various mass-movements like that of the Falangists, with a leftist populist appeal, articulated through fascism, a concept which at the time had not degenerated to a general word of political abuse, as well as monarchists, commonly referred to as the carlists. Opposed to them were the forces of liberalism, socialism and anarchism, pointing to modernism and the future. The electoral success of the latter sparking off an attempt at a coup d'etat, but a coup that failed and instead degenerated into a prolonged and bitter armed conflict.

It would be tedious to chronicle the succession of military campaigns, which were, during the circumstances, doomed to a foregone conclusion. On the side of the Nationalists were professional armies, (as Franco succeeded in air-lifting the Marrocan legionaries (usually referred to as the Moors) at a very crucial juncture in the very beginning taking place in late July 1936), further enhanced by German and Italian assistance³. Franco was very cautious by nature and induced to be even more so by subsequent developments and made no hurry, well aware that the logic of superior resources would in the end prevail, as it did some three years later, regardless of ideology. On the Republican side there were chaos, the government incapable of taking decisive action, leaving the necessary initiatives to the socialist trade unions and anarchistis syndicates UGT and CNT respectively, which numbered millions of members. They improvised militia-forces, who fought bravely and gallantly but inexperencedly and thus inexpertly and without appropriate resources. And one should not forget that in war, innate bravery can never compensate for incompetence, in fact part of military competence, (or maybe rather a consequence thereof), is acquired bravery, far more useful during the horrors of war than instinctive. The fact that the war went on for as long as it did is a testimony to the fact that incompetence was not the prerogative of the Republicans⁴, but could almost equally well be attributed to the Nationalists who made the one blunder after the other as well.

³ Especially the German Condor League was of crucial importance. Ironically there were also Germans (as well as Italians) fighting on the Republican side, and proving to be among its most effective forces

⁴ It has often been claimed in favour of Franco that he did not entertain any grandiose ambitions. He probably lacked the imagination for such, and even with a modicum of intelligence he must have realised that his fighting forces would never be up to par to international competition, an insight Mussolini was blinded to

The attitudes of western governments to the tribulations of Republican Spain were lukewarm at best. The British instinctively sympathized with the Nationalists, and although the French might be willing to lend active support under the Socialist government of Blum, the international situation with the rise of Hitler was too sensitive to encourage foreign adventures, so instead they subsumed their foreign policy to the supposedly joint interests of the British. The result was that a non-interventionist agreement was formed with the Germans and the Italians, which in view of the open flaunting by the latter powers, was one of unbridled hypocrisy. All that this effort of containment achieved was that material support to the Republican side was strangled, especially at the time it would have made most of a difference. Remained was the support of Stalin. This support obviously involved some non-trivial problems of logistics, and it was not given without severe strings attached. The Russian support was primarily calculated to strengthen the Communists (who constituted a minority) not necessarily to win the war, especially as Stalin was as anxious not to antagonize Hitler as was the French and the British. Neither aid was given for free. The Germans and Italians, in addition to given the opportunities of testing their weaponries and strategies, also demanded and received well needed raw material in exchange; and the Russians offered to take care of the gold reserves, still under the control of the Republicans, which they did, but exacting a heavy price for the services⁵

The initial militia on the side of the Republicans was gradually turned into a more conventional army, hierachial and centralized, very much under the pressures of the Communists, who preferred formal structures as being easier to infiltrate and manipulate, and in their ambitions they were greatly helped by the ear-marked Russian support. In fact a majority of the commanding posts in the army was taken over by the Communists, whose struggle for supremacy, was gradual but systematic, winning the initial as well as crucial support of the liberals, who thought that they would be able to control them in the end. The army so constructed, and which initially held a numerical superiority over the National, a superiority which meant little, due to the scarcity of weapons⁶, was primarily used to effect conventional objectives, instead of engaging in a more imaginative and disruptive way. Objectives usually chosen for its propaganda effects rather than its military strategic value.

What was on the side of the Republicans was popular enthusiasm, a conviction of fighting for life and liberty, of being enthralled in an epic struggle between the forces of the good and evil, liberalism and socialism against fascism. An enthusiasm that was contagious and did in fact affect not only intellectuals from abroad, but idealistic youth of no intellectual or political sophistication, making up International Brigands⁷. But the Republicans were deeply divided, precariously united only by the threat of a common enemy. Divided between the radical anarchists who were determined to effect a revolution of egalitarianism, with factories owned by workers, and land tilled by peasants collectives, as well as a total

⁵ Beevor claims that the Republicans would have been much better off sending the reserves to the Mexicans instead, who were the most unselfish in their support, but which due to the poverty of the country had to be limited.

⁶ estimates indicate that only one in ten soldiers had a rifle, in addition to which there was usually not enough ammunition to go around

⁷ military forces which were ineptly exploited, often callously sacrificed, causing protests and mutinies

dismantling of the Catholic church, and the forces of a more liberal, capitalist economy. In this struggle the Communists played a very insidious role, siding with the liberals (as useful idiots?) set out to destroy their main rivals - the anarchists, undercutting the very revolution they were affecting, giving as reason the paramount objective of resisting and defeating Franco, an objective beyond dispute. The anarchist stronghold was Catalonia, in particular its capital Barcelona, the most populous city of Spain, which became the scene of street-fighting and an emerging civil-war within the civil war itself.

From the outside the Republicans were depicted both as anti-clerical fanatics and as dangerous Reds. The fear of Bolshevism was very fresh in Europe, and the godlessness of its perpetrators scandalized and abhorred those of religious sensitivity. Rumours of atrocities were legion. War always involves atrocities on both sides, and undeniably there were indiscriminate killings on the Republican side as well as the Nationalist. Beervor claims though that the killing on the Republican side was spontaneous and limited, while the killings on the Nationalist side were systematic and extended. In fact the armies of Franco acted as an invading force giving no quarters to their vanquished, in spite of the fact of they being compatriots. But war of course has its own logic and dynamism, and the so called civil war instead of being an anomaly, should rather be considered the norm. Wars of conquests, between separate nationalities, which take such space in the narratives of history, are more ritual affairs, at least up to the 20th century. As to the desecration of churches, Beervor takes a rather cautious stand, claiming that the Republicans after all entertained a touching respect for property and that most churches were left alone, as was the poor clergy who had identified with their flocks. Other sources, like Orwell, noted that at least in Catalonia, all churches he saw, except Protestant, were gutted.

The military aspect of the war can be crudely summarized as follows. Initially the Republicans held the eastern part of Spain, not only Catalonia, but also as deep into the center as Madrid, and as south as Malaga, and also the northern coast including the strongly separatist Basque country; while the Nationalists established support basically around Sevilla, and in the central and western parts, only slowly extending their control. In the fall of 1936, Franco was set to achieve a major breakthrough by capturing Madrid, but he was stymied at the very outskirts of the encircled city⁸. This cooled down his impatience, and interest was diverted to the north. The well-known bombing of Guernica, which outraged international opinion and accorded the Republicans a major advance in the war of propaganda, took place in April of 1937, and by the summer Bilbao had been taken. By the fall of the north the Republicans lost an important industrial base, as well as a major outlet to the sea. By the summer of 1938 the relentless drive towards the east had been undertaken, effecting a wedge into Republican territory by the taking of Valencia. In the fall the Republicans tried at counter-offensive at Ebro, which resulted in large losses and an entrapment in what had essentially been a badly thought-out attempt. Thus they had little to counter the military superiority of the Nationalists as they attacked Catalonia, so the primer Negrin was reduced to engaging in a desperate diplomatic offensive, offering the withdrawal of the International Brigades. In January 1939 Barcelona was occupied, and in March Madrid fell. On April 1 Franco declared the war over.

⁸ Fighting was carried so far into the city, that it was reported that one could cross fronts using the still functioning metro

The Franco dictatorship lasted for almost forty years, a fact no doubt attributed to the Cold War. The regime was despised in leftist and liberal circles, but tolerated by the western governments as a bulwark against Communism and a upholding of religious faith. The Catholic church was in fact the great beneficiary of the Franco victory, greatly enhancing its power. In fact the Franco dynasty was never overthrown but slowly dissolved after his death as the country heaved itself out of its political and economical torpor. Armed opposition to Franco was almost negliable, the sporadic guerilla activity in the north had no impact, apart from justifying great security sources. Such activities tapered to an end by the late fifties. In fact the only open and sustained resistance to Franco was through the ETA, the terrorist separatism movement, whose terrorist label should give us cause for thought. What did Franco and his Allies really want? Apart from the Catholic Church it is hard to conceive of a coherent vision. Such a dictatorship naturally degenerates to kitsch, and Francos was no exception. In the mountains he build himself a future masoleum. I do not know whether it still exists, I would rather suspect so. Apart from the obvious date of his death it is hard to pinpoint a single date that marks a definitive transition. Beevor begins his book by the somewhat comical attempt at a coup in 1981, and how it was thwarted by the King, who refused to play along as the appointed heir. This event can be seen as the final nail in the coffin, but one should not see the act of the King as heroic, in fact he probably knew that he would have little choice, would he decide to upheld the ambition of a monarchy.

And as a war the Civil War in Spain blends in with countless conflicts which have marred the recent histories of much of the Third World, including the Balkans. Such conflicts depend on external supplies of military resources, without which they would fade away. Ideally no weapons, no wars, but there is always an insidious drive to match those of your ideological opponents, a drive resisted by the British and the French, with disastrous results to the Republic. In the modern wars on the African continent, simple desire for profit motivates weapon deliveries, and it is not uncommon that weapons are supplied to both sides. It has been rumoured, but not proved, that the Germans also supplied arms to the Republicans, Hitler seeing no point in a swift decisive Franco victory. Finally had the Civil War extended into the time of open hostility between the Allied and the forces of the Axies, it is doubtful whether it would have made much of a difference. The British and the French would no longer have been hampered diplomatically, but on the other hand they would have been too preoccupied with their own defence to really care for supporting a weak ally out of democratic sympathy.

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