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ROUNDTABLE ARTICLE

From Ideological to Humanistic Interpretations

Antonio Cazorla-Sánchez

Department of History, Lady Eaton College 101, Trent University, 1600 West Bank Drive, Peterborough, ON, K9L 0G2, Canada
acazorla@trentu.ca

The recent evolution of both the historiography on the Spanish Civil War, and even the general population's perception of the conflict, cannot be separated from the changes in the political and cultural paradigms in Europe since the end of the Cold War. By this I mean that Europeans, but not only them, have been evolving from a mostly ideological view of the past to an increasingly humanistic one.

This emerging humanistic turn is characterised by a more intensive attention to people's pain beyond their ideological, social or national adscriptions. Whereas in the past the victor or the defeated were the centre of the historian's attention, now it is the victim, the process of victimisation and the memory of victimhood. Of course, it is still possible today to devote a great deal of work and emotions to one's victims while downplaying the enemies' pain, but this position is less and less sustainable now than three decades ago.

In this humanist paradigm it is the pain of the subaltern groups in society, especially those who in the past did not deserve much study from historians because they were not active publicly or 'lacked consciousness', the ones that now rather suddenly are 'discovered' as neglected. Here is the reason why, for example, women, in particular non-militant women (as opposed to republican *milicianas*, members of the *Sección Femenina* of the Falange, etc.), emerge as an almost untouched and very attractive topic for historians, even for feminist historians previously more concerned with the proto-feminists (even the misguided fascists ones) of the Spanish Civil War. The same applies to conscripted soldiers. Until not so long ago, volunteers, either for the republic or for the rebels, caught the eye of historians, even if their numbers were less than ten percent of all fighters (including the famous International Brigades) in the war. Now their place has been taken by draftees or, as one historian has called them, the 'reluctant warriors' of the conflict. It also applies to children, who, in spite of eventually being the carriers of memory of the war, previously were only visible in most studies as simply photographs of the collateral damage of, mostly rebel, bombardment. While children were a useful object for propaganda they are now a rich topic of research which includes exploring, for example, their own vision of the conflict, their art and the traumas they experienced.

In sum, civilians, rather than militants, are the objects of the new historiography of the Spanish Civil War. In this regard there is still a lot to be done. For example, we know plenty about deaths by repression or during combat but much less about the experience of civilians, their deaths, their hunger and illnesses, their experiences as refugees, the effects of the war on families, etc. Those are promising topics because they connect with the expectations of today's consumer of history, who has less appetite than in the past for politically oriented narratives and far more desire for stories of human suffering.

The emergence of the humanistic paradigm is a worldwide phenomenon that in Europe and North America is intrinsically linked to the rise of the Holocaust as the benchmark of political violence of the continent in the twentieth century. Some authors even see the Holocaust as the most important historical event of the past century. In any case, the explosion of studies on the Holocaust and of the fate of its victims have decisively contributed to the new paradigm since the late 1970 (some authors have linked this to the effect of the 1979 television series *Holocaus*t; in any case Raul Hilberg's 1961 seminar work *The Destruction of the European Jews* was only reprinted and translated into German in 1982).

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Since then, studies on the Shoah produced many historical memory and public history projects that are, no doubt, a rich source of tools and ideas to be applied to the Spanish Civil War. However, the key to this potential usefulness resides in putting aside the concept of uniqueness, or even the pretention of benchmarking of the Holocaust, in the context of the century's political violence.

The best example of the role of the Holocaust in the birth of a new paradigm is Germany. This country's dealing with its own history of the 1930s and 1940s is most admirable, in part because of its relative exceptionality. Here we must distinguish between historiography on Germany and public history in Germany. With respect to the former, the study of Nazism and its crimes has proved a source of techniques for studying popular opinion, the process of brutalisation of civilians and soldiers, the cultural and mental construction of enemies and the evolution of the concepts of victims and perpetrators, etc., which can equally be applied to the Spanish Civil War. More remarkable, however, is the second aspect: the enormous output of public history projects which aim at establishing a democratic, inclusive, compulsive and yet compassionate memory in current German society at the expense of self-congratulatory and/or nationalist myths. All these developments should help us to both better tune our studies of the Spanish Civil War and to present them to the general public.

There are, however, risks with using the Holocaust in a rough manner to analyse other violent events of the past century. In particular, forcing the application of concepts such as genocide into the reality of the Spanish Civil War has proven controversial and of limited usefulness. In the past decade some historians decided that employing other terms could be perceived as being too weak and not morally condemnatory enough of the perpetrators, particularly with respect to the crimes committed by the rebels or 'fascists'. It is a temptation that must be resisted since the crimes committed during the Spanish Civil War, and later by the dictatorship, fit more easily into other concepts, such as crimes against humanity, atrocities, massacres or simply murder, than genocide. They convey in a more precise way than does genocide or Holocaust what actually happened in Spain.

Another European country whose historiography is particularly apt for Spain is Italy. There, unlike in Germany, there was a civil war in the last two years of the fascist regime. Because Italy was a democracy for decades while Spain was still a dictatorship, Italian historians and public history practitioners have been dealing longer than Spaniards with similar themes to the Spanish Civil War. For example, the crucial ones of how to interpret the fact that both sides committed atrocities, and how to transmit such reality, which includes divided memories, to the public today. In spite of this, the travails of both Italian historiography and public history are still frequently ignored when studying the civil war in Spain.

Some historians have looked at Spain as an exception or, worse, as a case in which democracy has mistreated the memories of the losers of the war, perhaps because this democracy is not a true one. I find those approaches misguided, in part because they look in the wrong direction, but also because they lack a truly comparative approach. When the Second World War ended, most of Western Europe was ruled by democracies. In democracies, civil society plays a pivotal role in shaping remembrance, either by acting directly itself or by pressuring governments to adopt popular polices. This pressure created vacuums, or convenient lacunae of memory, in which unpleasant and unpopular aspects of the past were forgotten or self-repressed. Yet the official or public memory of events was still substantially different and deeply more inclusive than in contemporary dictatorships, either right wing or left wing.

The former case applies to the Franco dictatorship that both greatly suppressed civil society and imposed a one-sided policy of remembrance in which the victims from his side became much celebrated and lamented martyrs, while the victims on the republican side of the war were either officially demonised or forgotten. Private remembrances of the republicans, and even of the Francoists, in Spain were very different from the official ones, but they had to be limited to small circles such as families, and their transmission to the younger generations was difficult as they carried risks for all involved. Once democracy was restored in the late 1970s the situation changed rather rapidly, with historians, novelists, filmmakers and witnesses coming forward to express the memories repressed during the previous four decades.

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But there was a problem: unlike most of Europe, Spain's memory of political violence was not one of the supposed majority of the people against a foreign imposed tyranny. It was not, for example, a noble, if flawed, tale of the freedom loving nation fighting the Nazi yoke, aided by the few (so it was pretended) rotten apples who collaborated during the occupation. In the case of Spain, and to an extent of Italy, remembrance of political violence was revisiting a very gruesome civil war in which both sides had committed atrocities and in which constructing a unifying narrative, or, if the reader prefers, a shared memory, was very difficult and perhaps impossible. In some parts of Spain, such as the Basque Country and Catalonia, local nationalist movements attempted precisely that by presenting the Spanish Civil War as a war against their local freedoms, but this was clearly an imposture that ignored the divisions of Basque and Catalan societies during and after the war (in fact, more Basque soldiers fought for Franco than for the republic). Civil wars are a very difficult memory because they create political identities that last many generations (the American Civil War and its long lasting political, social and racial legacies in today's United States is an example). In Europe, the legacies of civil wars in Ireland, Italy, Finland and Greece are in many ways similar to Spain's.

If we want to transmit the whole experience of political violence in the twentieth century (and the underrepresented violence that preceded it) to students and public alike, we must start thinking beyond nationalistic boundaries and discourses and scrap the concept of the exceptionality (for better or for worse) of any European country. Seen in perspective, the different experiences of violence and their representation in public history, while diverse, are not that different after all. But how can we represent them in a way that both conveys their transnational nature and is effective in changing public attitudes to national history? Historians and other practitioners should concentrate on forcing governments to adopt public history polices that at least match our knowledge and start this by discarding the national paradigm and embracing the humanistic one. This is a most imperative mission, especially on a continent where nationalism, chauvinism and xenophobia are on the rise. However, we must also be cautious about expectations because the public history of violence has its limits, as the case of Germany, the exception to the rule regarding 'difficult history', shows. That country's commendable efforts in this field have not prevented the resurgence of far-right nationalism. This should make us question whether we are doing enough, or what we are doing wrong.

Public history of a civil war is typically a 'difficult history'. It is an event or process whose representation in public memory often lacks official support in part because that support might divide society. The United States offers good examples of this. While the morally comforting Museum of the Holocaust in Washington, a place where the Shoah did not take place, opened in 1993, in this same city, built by slaves, the more 'difficult' African American Museum did not open until 2016. Lastly, that country did not have a national civil war museum until 2019 (it is located in Richmond, in the old Museum of the Confederacy). For all its many merits, this museum, created with private money, fails to address in depth both the causes and the aftermath of the American Civil War – precisely the most difficult aspects of the conflict.

Spain still does not have – for many reasons – a national museum of history and certainly not a civil war museum, albeit in the last two decades centres of public history have been created in Guernica, Salamanca and Barcelona, and there is a projected museum of the Battle of the Teruel. But Spain's (or rather the Spanish political right's) reluctance to create such a museum is far from unique in Europe. Neither Italy nor Finland or Greece have civil war museums. In the first case, there are many museums commemorating deportation, resistance or liberation during the Second World War, but the cursed concept of 'civil war' does not appear. In the last two cases, their civil wars are included as part of military museums, thus making them part of a military rather than of a civil (thus social, ideological, cultural, etc.) conflict. Only Ireland has civil war museums, but this might be explained both because the Irish Civil War is also part of a wider narrative of national liberation and the number of mortal victims and prisoners was very small (less than 2,000 and about 12,000 respectively) when compared with Spain (400,000 thousand and over a million respectively). The Irish Civil War and its aftermath obviously divided society but never to the extent of Spain's.

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However, civil wars, when analysed in an even wider context, are far from being a unique case of failure of public history to reflect national violent history. The case of the United Kingdom is most telling: where are the museums of such a central theme of British identity as colonialism, empire and all their brutalities? Where is the museum of such a source of wealth and suffering as slavery (apart from a little room in Liverpool)? We could apply the same to France (the Nantes museum of slavery is called 'Museum of the Abolition of Slavery'!) or the Low Countries. They are not aberrations. Narratives that question the nation or the glory of the nation are systematically underrepresented in Europe's public history projects, except for Germany, which, as previously discussed, has built a new national identity in reflecting and rejecting its recent past. The German case has shown that human rights, rather than national rights, can be the way to the future.

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