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Contemporary European History (2020), **29**, *285–288*
doi:10.1017/S0960777320000296

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ROUNDTABLE ARTICLE

Understanding Violence

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Any civil war leaves a legacy of partisanship. Divisions persist over time and may be particularly bitter when, as in Spain, a culture of victory survives long after the end of hostilities. Any attempt at reconciliation was postponed, leading to an unusually bifurcated historiography, framed by a perennial interest into who, at base, was responsible for the outbreak of the civil war. The parameters of this debate were set in the 1970s, most notably in works by Stanley Payne and Paul Preston. It has continued in various guises since then, most recently revived by a generation of Spanish scholars, such as Fernando del Rey Reguillo, who have added case studies and new levels of detail, while leaving the terms of the debate more or less unchanged. Of course the historiographical panorama can change, often in tandem with the historical context, as several contributions to this roundtable make clear, notably those of Vjeran Pavlaković, Helen Graham and Giuliana Chamedes. However, the framing of the Spanish Civil War is still essentially moral: who bore responsibility for the outbreak of war, who was to blame for the defeat of the republic and, as a consequence, the conduct of the repression. One result has been to assimilate the history of the civil war with that of the Second Republic; another is a historiography that is largely political in tone and focus.

There is a partial exception in studies of the anticlerical violence that broke out in the republican rearguard, dominating the 'hot summer' of 1936. Here, cultural anthropology, particularly the work of Manuel Delgado, has led to a heavy reliance on symbolic understandings of anticlericalism. Ideas of purification, along with catharsis and the exposure of corruption, are used to interpret a repertoire of violence that included arson, the ritualised destruction of devotional objects and the killing of nearly 8,000 priests, monks and, to a much lesser extent, nuns. As Julio de la Cueva has recently demonstrated, anticlerical violence in the Spanish Civil War was not as extensive as during the Russian but it exceeded that experienced during the French and Mexican Revolutions. And, in this first 'media war', reports of anticlerical violence abounded in the international press. Even photographs were not uncommon.

To date most studies of anticlerical violence have focused on the protagonists. Little scholarly attention has been paid to the effects of violence on those who feared or were targeted by it, though hagiographies abound. Historians have instead emphasised the bonding effects of transgressive behaviour, proletarian anticlerical identities and the formation of a revolutionary community. Not uncommonly, such studies also position themselves within the responsibilities debate, arguing for rational motivations behind apparently irrational actions, which were in any case provoked by the social and political position of the Catholic Church. The similar explanatory arguments put forward by Joan Connelly Ullman and Maria Thomas are a case in point. But more significantly, the weight given to symbolic interpretations has led to a failure – or a reluctance – to recognise the more prosaic forms of violence that also characterised anticlerical assault.

A focus on the *form* of violence rather than its symbolic meaning shows just how often anticlerical assault was bound up with mechanisms of local violence as communities divided along civil war lines. The composition of the two belligerent sides was, to some extent, contingent on local circumstances, but the violence was between neighbours, as studies of the republican rearguard make clear. Even when committed groups – usually militia columns – served as a vector of revolution (or repression),

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777320000296 Published online by Cambridge University Press

they needed local informants and collaborators. And, in this process, personal motivations were at least as important as ideological ones. They may even, as Stathis Kalyvas argues, drive the violence at the local level as people looked to secure their position, protect their families or use the chaotic circumstances to their own advantage.

A recognition of the often unpalatable nature of civil war violence is also needed when looking at assaults on material objects, which account for much of the anticlerical violence. In contrast to Kalyvas, who takes little account of ritual violence, the focus has again been on the symbolic: the use of fire, the mutilation of statues, treated as if they were living beings, the public and performative nature of the assaults. Far less attention has been paid to the banal events that accompanied these spectacular, ritualised acts, the looting, theft and vandalism that was almost certainly the most common form of anticlerical 'violence'. This relative lack of scholarly interest may have been compounded by a reluctance to use the language of the sources – virtually all of which are mediated by the church – and so to give credence to the ideological framework imposed on anticlerical violence by both the clerical victims and their protectors in Franco's National-Catholic New State. Their accounts speak routinely of 'looting', 'sacking' and 'pillage' and equally routinely embellish their stories with references to frenzies, drunkenness and sexual licence.

Terms such as 'sacking' are, quite clearly, pejorative, and are no more appropriate to studies of the Spanish Civil War than to those about the Vikings. This is even truer of the way the narratives are framed, with their unhesitating, binary distinction between 'Reds' and patriots, atheists and Christians, bad and good. But, if we look at the forms the violence actually took, distinguishing it wherever possible from the way in which it is described, it is quite clear that it invariably involved looting, a term that may be used pejoratively but is also simply descriptive of an established historical phenomenon. And all these forms of violence – vandalism, ritual destruction, incendiarism, theft – involved some form of interaction with material objects. Looting, for example, centres on portable objects, which may be valuable, decorative or practical. As well as liturgical and devotional items, religious houses lost cutlery, glassware, crockery and bed linen, all of which are easy to carry away. The removal of large items required more organisation and authority, but the black market in looted art works – in which the CNT was clearly implicated – leaves no doubt that this was also relatively common.

Examining rearguard violence in terms of materiality changes our view in several ways. It introduces other actors alongside the human: landscapes, the built environment, ruins, objects. In the case of looting it moves the focus away from ideological – and often romanticised – ideas of anarchist 'redistribution' or rejection of worldly goods to what actually happened, and to the common rather than the exceptional. Similarly, it reinstates the prosaic alongside the symbolic. It is really no surprise that looting was intrinsic to assaults on buildings, whether churches, monasteries or palaces; the refusal to loot or the return of objects was much rarer. The removal of knives and forks from a residential school, or of candles from a church, was unlikely to cause much in the way of emotional distress. But this was emphatically not the case with devotional objects, whether patronal images removed from village shrines or rosaries and medals confiscated during searches of private homes.

The emotional life of objects and the relationship that people had with them has become a significant concern in recent historical enquiry and, again, can be applied to the history of the civil war with good effect. But this is only one example of how looking at how people *felt* rather than what they *thought* can enhance, or even change, our understanding of the Spanish Civil War. Perhaps it is because I have spent so long working on religion that this seems to me to be self-evident. Religious faith is a prime example of something that may be intellectual but may equally well not be. Confessional affiliation may be strongly or weakly felt – a fact that is universally acknowledged but rarely evident in the historiography – and determined at least as much by culture as by metaphysical belief. Religion may also serve as a proxy for something else: a desire for order, a yearning for tradition, a quest for familiarity. Yet, 'Catholic' is still too often used as a simple, over-arching label, usually synonymous with 'Francoist' and invariably with 'the right'.

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In part, of course, this is explained by the strength of the binary divide that drove the conflict. Cleavage is intrinsic to the very idea of civil war and it is often assumed that the strongly ideological nature of the Spanish conflict deepened this binary divide. Indeed, recent attempts to address the issue have argued for an intermediate or non-ideological 'grey' zone, between the defined 'red' and 'blue' sides. But – particularly when expressed as a 'third Spain' – such spatial metaphors paradoxically reinforce the binary divide they are looking to problematise. Studies that emphasis the contingent choices made by individuals looking to stay out of trouble – the 'ordinary' Spaniards – are perhaps more successful in questioning the binary, though at the risk of discarding ideology altogether. This is, for example, the case with Michael Seidman's influential work, which sees personal motivation largely in terms of economics, or untheorised ideas of 'egotism'.

But human beings do not simply make rational decisions or behave according to the rules of economic determinism. This is another area in which we need to consider feelings and how these should be written into the script of the Spanish Civil War, not least in terms of the production of memory. In my current work on religious violence and iconoclasm I have made extensive use of life-writing and of photographic collections, both of which relate not only to the historical moment they describe – or capture, in the case of photographs – but also to how this will be remembered. There is a clear intent to shape memory, invariably within the binary categories created by the war. This process of transmission – the relationship between past and future – comes into view more sharply if we look at it in terms of the history of emotions, both at the feelings depicted in these texts and also the feelings that led the authors to create them.

To take one example: the martyrologies written by members of religious communities in tribute to those killed, usually extra-legally, in the republican rearguard. Though often lumped together with beatification causes from the 1950s and much later hagiographies – another example of the marked tendency to depict the church as a monolithic entity, including across time – the accounts written during and shortly after the war form a distinct corpus. Often written by survivors, these texts are less mediated and less 'official' than the later works. They are still strongly patterned by the conventions of hagiography – which is among Europe's oldest literary genres – but they are also highly personal texts, written to commemorate friends who had died and, perhaps, to address the author's own trauma. Such texts are both a product and a reflection of an emotional community, a group of people bound together by common experience who had, in the language of the church, renounced biological for spiritual kinship. It is no coincidence that monastic orders are Barbara Rosenwein's original example of an emotional community. Among ordained male clergy, the fact that many had entered junior seminaries and novitiates as children accentuated this closeness. The cloister was their world, and its violent disruption in the summer of 1936 left all displaced, many confused and some bereft.

Inevitably, people differed in their response. Martyrologies usually follow the conventions of melodrama but, on occasion, experiences of survival and escape are written as tales of heroism and adventure. And virtually all of the accounts make it clear that the martyrs – particularly those executed by firing squad – accepted their fate as a sacrifice for God. Centuries of Catholic teaching meant that these men knew how to die, which they did crying 'Viva Cristo Rey'. But these texts also speak of trauma, with clear reference to negative emotions, notably grief, loss and fear. Historical work on the 'martyrs' – a term that also included the Francoist war dead – has focused on sacrifice as a source of legitimation for both the New State and also the brutal repression it enacted on the defeated. Historical memory – which is as at least as much a public as an academic movement – has focused on the latter, propelled by knowledge of the scale of the repression and the vivid evidence provided by bone pits the length and breadth of Spain. The redress of wrongs is always a prime mover in public history debates. But, if we are to understand why the legacy of partisanship survived not only the civil war but also the ensuing dictatorship, we need to examine the modes of transmission not only of the myths around the conflict but also of the emotions that it generated and with which it was remembered.

This will not, in itself, bring partisan debates to a close. But recognising and illuminating nuance and suggesting new questions and angles of approach will point towards alternative framings. For example, despite the clichés and exaggerations that characterise the martyrologies' accounts of their

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anticlerical assailants, I have yet to find one that does not have at least one – possibly equally stereotyped – character of a 'good Red'. As Cardinal Gomá put it when assessing the losses on returning to Toledo in October 1936: 'some are crooks, some scoundrels, some impious . . . and some astonishingly ignorant'. Such recognition of the range of experience and commitment found among the 'Reds' was not to survive the rhetoric of victory, certainly not in Gomá's case. But it existed and can be seen, albeit fleetingly, even in these highly partisan sources.

Cite this article: Vincent M (2020). Understanding Violence. *Contemporary European History* **29**, 285–288. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777320000296

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