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ROUNDTABLE ARTICLE

On Historicising the War in Spain

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In the early 2000s a popular British history magazine commissioned me to write a historiographical essay on the war of 1936–9 in Spain, only then to say that they wouldn't be able to publish my text because their readers 'wouldn't recognise in it *the war they knew*'. The essay I'd written analysed the conflict in 1930s Spain in the context of the many cognate ones catalysed across continental Europe by the war of 1914–8. All these conflicts were, in one way or another, conflicts between those who wanted to preserve the hierarchical social and political structures of the pre-1914 European world, already shaken by the First World War, and those who sought to effect some form of levelling social and political change, whether by reformist or revolutionary means. Everywhere, including in Spain, such conflicts arose from a common hinterland of accelerating urbanisation, industrialisation and, crucially, from the accompanying processes of increasing migration from countryside to city.

The history magazine's response seemed idiosyncratic even then, given that what I was describing was not new within the specialist historiography. But it was not until later in the new millennium that this perspective began to percolate through to a more general readership, perhaps largely as a result of Mark Mazower's book *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (1998). Accessible and synthesising, yet also original for its intellectual range and depth, this book brought into sharper focus both for historians and for a broader popular readership a picture of Europe 1918–48 in the throes of rapid and volatilising structural change, a process which having been accelerated by the First World War would then be consummated by the second. As Mazower's analysis suggested, the patterns of internecine social and political conflict across the continent were virtually always connected to the changing relationships and (political) equilibrium between urban and rural populations, and also to their respective attitudes and expectations. All of this was also true for Spain, where the same transformative processes, including of migration, had been accelerated by the First World War, even though the country had not been a belligerent power.

Mazower's picture of volatilising change across Europe, and the state and social violence which it catalysed, also connected earlier imperial violence visited by Europeans on exterior colonised populations with its revisitation by Europeans on themselves in the 1930s and 1940s. In the now well-known formulation of Aimé Césaire, fascism/Nazism were 'colonialism come home'. The broad lines of Mazower's enquiry have since allowed Europeanists, myself included, to explore the period from the First World War to the post-Second World War (c. 1948) as an anthropology of violence: in other words to see how the myriad, interconnected and accelerating forms of transcontinental social and political violence were generated, and how, once conjured, these forms of violence then functioned as the medium through which processes of structural change were 'negotiated'. Although Mazower's own book put no particular emphasis on Spain, for those of us working on the war of 1936–9 and on the ensuing, war-forged Franco dictatorship, who were seeking to analyse their deeper significance in the warp and weft of larger continental change, *Dark Continent* has offered a great deal, including quite specifically with regard to the internal colonisation alluded to by Césaire. For the military coup in Spain in July 1936 was made by officers from the colonial army of Africa: and their 'occupation' of Spain, what they also called its 'reconquest' through war, was first and foremost designed, and justified, as a push back against what they deemed the unwelcome levelling effects of an urbanising

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and industrialising society. It was, moreover, that changing society which, in some obscure and irrational way, the coup-making officers 'blamed' for the loss of Spain's empire.

According to these readings, the many battles for and against rigidly stratified forms of politics and society across post-First World War Europe were wars of social change, whether they were waged on, or off, conventional battlefields. In Spain, as across the continent, these social wars were fought in both modes. Once Spain's military coup began to falter in the face of urban resistance, its instigating officers welcomed the Nazi and Italian Fascist intervention which would see it escalate to a battlefield war (the coup makers had not envisaged a war of that kind, even though they had intended to inflict massive 'exemplary' violence on civilians who opposed them). As it was, the coup itself also triggered a dirty war in which civilians used lethal violence against each other. And here the Spanish case prefigures the nature of the Second World War in Europe, as a series of internal wars which were waged by civilians on other civilians within individual countries, regions and societies across the continent – wars which, though catalysed by Nazi occupation/expansionism, were not reducible to its agendas. Across Europe, these forms of state and social violence became the key means through which the twentieth-century continent would be reshaped after 1945. However, in Spain, unlike elsewhere, the victory in place remained the one which had been facilitated by Nazism. Already by 1939 the Francoist victors were something other than the gothic collection of military-clerical traditionalists, romantics and murderous cultural nostalgists they'd been in 1936. For the war itself transformed Francoism into something new – and modern: an ultranationalist project intent upon implementing total political victory 'at home'. Throughout the 1940s Francoism would engage in a long process of violent, exclusionary state and nation building. Quasi- and extra-judicial executions, mass imprisonment and forced labour camps across Spain turned the entire country into a prison ship for more than ten years after the end of the battlefield war. And for decades thereafter highly punitive forms of social disciplining and political surveillance remained in force far beyond the prison walls. For the dictatorship and its supporting social coalition, all these were prophylactics to conjure the old nightmare of the 1936 coup makers, of a changing society spinning inexorably out of their control.

My own 'Europeanising' magazine essay on the conflict in Spain would in expanded form become a book, *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction* (2005). It has sold over 50,000 copies in English, not counting the lively trade on large second-hand book sites, and aside from several Spanish editions, it has also been translated to German, Portuguese, Brazilian Portuguese, Greek and Turkish. From 2005 and continuing up to the present, readers of many different kinds email me about the book from all over the world. I rehearse this here because from readers' comments over the intervening years it is clear that there has long been an audience out there able to recognise and understand the relationship between what happened in Spain and the intense, convulsive violence across other areas of Europe in the crucible of the 1920s, 30s and 40s. And yet I'm often drawn back to reflect on that British magazine editor's comment of the early 2000s – 'a war we do not recognise' – because while it has not been not borne out in terms of a broader readership, ironically it does still accurately describe a notable and enduring blind spot among British and North American Europeanists when it comes to the conflict in Spain. While most have long assimilated the broad perspectives and forms of analysis brought together in Mazower's book, they still stop short of applying them to Spain. Over the past two decades this curiosity has given rise to a number of different, probably related, phenomena. First is that the war in Spain, and the extreme nationalism and population sculpting to which it gave rise under Francoism, almost always remain 'invisible' in what are otherwise wide-ranging and often conceptually sophisticated transcontinental studies of political and societal violence in twentieth-century Europe. (Once, egregiously, in a North American work concerned with contextualising forms of exterminatory and 'cleansing' violence in twentieth-century Europe, the only reference to Spain in the entire analysis was a passing one – *to the fifteenth-century Inquisition*.) And still today, standard Anglo-American works of comparative European history tend to 'mention' the conflict of the 1930s in Spain only via a passing, and now frankly mothballed, reference the play of great power diplomacy in the 'run-up' to the Second World War. If, unusually, an attempt is made to comment on the interstices of Spain's social and political conflict, the footnoted

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references usually indicate obliviousness to some thirty years of specialist historiography on the war, as of the continuation of that war which we call Francoism. Not infrequently, too, this error is compounded by the citing of long superseded works of history, usually English ones, and even, sometimes, we still see George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* popping up, *but* not as a primary source, which would be quite legitimate, but rather as if it were a work of current empirical historiography. No comparative Europeanist would consider these forms of antiquated citation an acceptable methodology if they were writing about Germany, Italy or Russia. So the fact that the 'practice' still goes unremarked where Spain is concerned indicates that in some peculiar way, in the minds of most British and American Europeanists, the country's history inhabits some sort of 'antiquarian niche'.

An analysis of what all this means historically would probably take an entire further essay to unravel. But it is closely connected to the long and complicated reach of the Cold War. While a gradual unfreezing of its long historical distortions did start to happen in the 1990s in other areas of post-war European history (even if it has since been rapidly re-skewed with the subsequent re-emergence of extreme forms of nationalism across Europe), in the case of the war in Spain that opening has scarcely ever occurred. Thus British and North American Europeanists continue to operate, often without even realising it, using conceptualisations of the war and of Francoism which are themselves products of a Cold War lens, when not actually also 'representations' manufactured by the Franco dictatorship itself ('the war of two equal sides' springs to mind) – indeed there is a lot of slippage across these two sets of 'analytical' categories as they came to circulate within the West during the Cold War. That Franco's own PR was permitted such latitude for its duration is unsurprising, given that the dictatorship was itself salvaged and underwritten by the Western alliance (not just by the United States). But why the sanitised myth of Francoism (or indeed the equally inaccurate one of it as an 'old-fashioned dictatorship') should still be resistant to dismantling even today, so long after the putative end of the Cold War, is an interesting object for historical study in itself. And nor does it work to try to reduce this, in circular fashion, to the perennial lack of English translations of specialist historiography on Spain. Nor, conversely, to observe that comparative Anglo-American Europeanists still tend to lack a reading knowledge of Spanish. Because a deeper question is why this is still *perceived not to matter*, underlying which there is an answering unspoken assumption: that even without access to recent specialist historiography, *the essentials about the 1930s in Spain are somehow already known.* (How else are we to interpret comparative Europeanists persisting in footnoting, in prime position, revised editions of Hugh Thomas's 1961 compendium?) This has far less to do with linguistic limitations than it does with the curious persistence of the Cold War's ideological 'lens' within the West, nowhere more evidently displayed than over the war in Spain.

Spain's 'antiquarian niche' is likewise perpetuated by another, partially overlapping, phenomenon – the as yet unpunctured 'exceptionalism' which prevails when British historians contemplate Spain. There was of course a lengthy social and economic relationship between Spanish high society and Britain's own elites, whether aristocratic or mesocratic. It is nevertheless remarkable that British historians of the United Kingdom should still not have produced any real analysis of the hugely erosive effects of the war in Spain on British imperial power and strategy. Remarkable, too, that mainstream British history should still, in 2020, also have so little to say about how the war in Spain was bound up with crucial forms of levelling social change *inside the United Kingdom itself*.

Nor is it that we lack the empirical historiographical work for this to happen, including a recent scholarly monograph (2017) on the substantial forms of humanitarian mobilisation inside British civil society which were catalysed by the war in Spain. Likewise with the notable phenomenon of the several thousand British men and women who volunteered for service in the International Brigades or in other volunteer units, both as soldiers and as medical and ancillary staff (ambulance drivers, doctors, nurses, health care staff and so on), we have long had plentiful and empirically excellent historical studies. The overwhelming majority of these volunteers went to support the beleaguered Spanish Republic because they perceived in it a symbol of hope for a fairer society – i.e. this links back to the forms of social and economic levelling which had been accelerating in Europe since the First World War. But given how little most volunteers from the United Kingdom really knew of Spain

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(George Orwell included), it is patently obvious that the historical significance of their perceptions, as of their subsequent volunteering (or humanitarian activities within Britain), belongs first and foremost to British interwar history itself. But what this all might have meant in terms of the changes occurring to social consciousness and to social structures still remains largely 'unnoticed' by the British historical mainstream in spite of the existence of the aforementioned specialist historiography, as well as plentiful primary source material, including some memoir material which offers rich potential for this kind of macro-historical analysis. This blind spot further extends to quite tangible components, such as the major medical advances made in Spain during the war, and especially those made within the republican army's medical services – most notably in triage and blood transfusion, and also sometimes with the cooperation of international volunteers who were senior medical professionals. Yet I remember well a major 2008 exhibition at the Wellcome Collection in London on twentieth-century war and medicine, in which the commentary and exhibits passed seamlessly from the medical advances of the First World War to those of the Second World War.

Such tangibles aside, perhaps part of the problem for what is still a fairly traditionalist and high-politically oriented British historical mainstream is that such subjects inevitably bring centre stage questions which are increasingly political in a different sense – race, ethnicity and, above all, social class, at whose confluence in the 1930s lay the phenomenon of migration. Across continental Europe, histories and experiences of migration were largely what generated the soldier volunteers for the republic in Spain. As I wrote in 2005 in *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction*, the global phenomenon of the International Brigades, which comprised some 35,000 volunteer soldiers and many hundreds of medical and ancillary staff – overwhelmingly from continental Europe – is inconceivable without taking account of the significant migratory processes already in train after the First World War, and especially those out of central and southern/south-eastern Europe. But for the British Isles too there is an interesting historical analysis, still waiting to be pieced together from the fragments, on the relationship between colonialism/migration and volunteering in Spain. But, instead, what still prevails in the historical literature is the usual opaque statement that 'a lot of people joined communist organisations or sympathised with them in the 1930s and this led them to volunteer for the IBs and similar'. Quite aside from the empirical limitations of this statement (there is no 'perfect symmetry' between communist affiliation and support for the republic in Spain), more importantly, the statement doesn't, even in itself, address the pertinent *historical* question: what in the sum of the volunteers' lived experiences explains their engagement/political affiliation? 'Because they were communists' doesn't even amount to a useful recapitulation of the historical question, which remains thus oddly out of focus.

But if the migratory flux of Europe's wars of social change is still largely absent from the mainstream Anglo-American historiography on 1930s Spain, it does not always come as a revelation to a broader audience. From my own teaching experience over thirty-seven years, I've seen important changes in understanding and receptiveness to these themes among British undergraduates. The profile of British university students has of course itself changed significantly over the past fifteen or twenty years. Now many more who study history as a degree Britain would count a family history of migration within their own memory and experience, which in turn opens them to an understanding of this key yet occluded aspect of interwar European history, including in the recruitment of volunteers to the Spanish republican war effort. Of course the student cohorts who now recognise these things for what they are do not much resemble the demographic still imagined by popular British history magazines – but they do understand the war that occurred in Spain only too well.

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