

# Interpreting the Spanish Civil War

GABRIEL JACKSON  
*San Diego University, California (U.S.A.)*

As all of you in the present audience surely know, the Spanish Civil War has occupied, and pre-occupied, me for almost forty years, or well over half of my entire life span. I have written two books, and many articles, on the subject. It played a prominent role in all my three decades of teaching both general European history and modern Spanish history. And on numerous occasions in 1986 I took part in fiftieth anniversary commemorations in the form of round tables and lectures in Spanish universities, municipalities, and ateneos. With an audience this evening composed predominantly of students and professors I am confident that it is not necessary to offer a general lecture on the civil war, even though this is the beginning of the course of lectures. I would like to use my allotted time in a way that would be more interesting to you as fellow investigators and teachers, and it seems to me that one such way would be to devote my lecture to questions of interpretation.

I hope at the outset that you will forgive me a few autobiographical paragraphs. It is the duty of any historian to write and speak as objectively as is humanly possible, but he or she does not live in a vacuum. The selection and interpretation of data, the relative weight given to different phases of the subject, will inevitably be influenced by the context of the historian's own life. I propose to begin then by mentioning those factors of timing and context which, so far as I can judge my own case impersonally, have been important in shaping my original interpretation and the various nuances of change in my views with the passage of time.



The most intensive period of work was the decade 1954-64. That decade included an invaluable two year fellowship in Spain and France, during which time I haunted the hemerotecas, interviewed some 120 political and military participants in the civil war, and wrote most of the first draft of *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War*. During the other eight years I was engaged in fulltime teaching of modern European and Latin American history. I spent somewhat more time with my wife and young children than did many of my colleagues, feeling that I would rather «produce» more slowly than truncate the unique experience of raising a family. But in those eight years virtually all my waking hours that were not absorbed by my teaching or by my family were devoted to reading everything I could lay my hands on concerning Spain from approximately 1875 to the end of the civil war in 1939. From Wellesley College I made fortnightly trips to the Harvard University Library, and during several summers I spent short periods reading in the Library Of Congress those books and pamphlets which were not available at Harvard. I need hardly emphasize how wonderful it is, in an American university library, to be able to borrow for several weeks any book which is not a rare and therefore irreplaceable item. I do not see how, just physically, I could have written the Princeton book, and my scholarly articles, without the borrowing privileges of the Harvard Library.

Turning now to the context: the Spain which I first knew as a graduate student in 1951 had barely begun to recover from the disastrous effects of the civil war. Maimed veterans of the victorious army as serenos in the urban apartment complexes; Andalusian children with eye diseases and suffering evidently from general malnutrition; people selling single cigarettes, or sticks of chewing gum, rather than packages; several different sorts of police on every sidewalk; a completely censored press and radio. National Catholicism and a repressive dictatorship ruled Spain, and in the United States students with leftist convictions or personal associations, myself among them, were being pursued by McCarthyism. Later, during the decade of my intensive research (1954-64) the economic situation of Spain, and the political atmosphere of both Spain and the US, improved considerably. On the one hand then I felt constantly motivated by my hatred of all dictatorships and all forms of political repression. On the other hand I felt democracy to be recovering in my own country; and in Spain, much as I disliked the dictatorship I could see that material conditions were improving and that people were not as afraid to utter their thoughts as they had been in 1951.

Since 1965 the study of the civil war has occupied me much less than in the prior decade. By sheer accident of circumstances I became the founding chairman of department at the new branch of the University of California established in San Diego (referred to also the La Jolla campus). Between 1966 and 1983 I also served in a number of other elective and administrative posts. I wrote a



short book on medieval Spain for the «Library of European Civilization» being edited by the distinguished English historian Geoffrey Barroclough. I wrote a novel concerning a miscarriage of justice in the US during the MacCarthy era. I helped to design and administer, as well as teach, an introductory course in the humanities for students most of whom were going to become scientists. I believe that this seventeen year stretch combining teaching with administration and with frequent political contact with municipal and state officials, has certainly contributed to my understanding of how power is actually exercised in a democratic capitalist society. And I believe that such experience is very useful for a practicing historian. But with regard to my work on the Spanish civil war it means that my new thinking has been based on reading the post-1965 publications of other scholars rather than on new archival research of my own.

There are five areas of interpretation in which new data from post 1965 publications, or personal political experiences and reflections of my own, have altered some of the opinions I expressed in *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War*. Let me first name them, and then proceed to a separate discussion of each: 1) the relative importance of persons as against that of economic and social forces; 2) the quantity and the military importance of foreign troops and arms; 3) the number of reprisal deaths on both sides; 4) the role of statistical data; 5) the interpretation of the entire history of the republic and the war as phases in the modernization of Spain.

With regard to the first subject: during the 1950's I was very powerfully influenced by the several currents of Spanish thought which emphasize the importance of individual human beings, their education, their morality, their capacity for leadership. I had written my doctoral thesis on Joaquín Costa. I was in complete agreement with his slogan «escuela y despensa.» I admired tremendously, and needless to say, I continue to admire tremendously, the founders of the Institución Libre de Enseñanza, with their constant emphasis on the need to form persons as the first necessity for achieving political liberty and social justice in late 19th and early 20th century Spain. I was deeply impressed by the «yo y mis circunstancias» of Ortega y Gasset and by the «vivir desviéndose» and the impassioned humanism of Américo Castro. I listened to speculations about the importance of generations and of small nuclei of cultural leaders from the lips of Jaume Vicens Vives. I had several conversations with Manuel Lorenzo Pardo, the great hydraulic engineer of the Confederación del Ebro, for whom both Joaquín Costa, and General Primo de Rivera, in their different ways, represented the type of regenerationism, of revolution from above, which could rescue Spain from its centuries of backwardness. I had conversations on different aspects of the civil war with Manuel Giménez Fernández, leader of the liberal wing of the CEDA; with Indalecio Prieto, ablest of the parliamentary socialists; with Amos Salvador, personal and political friend

of Azaña; with Dionisio Ridruejo, with General Vicente Rojo, and with Manuel de Irujo and other members of the «Delegation Basque» in Paris. The memories of defeat, and the circumstances of exile, external or internal, may well have exaggerated in these men's minds the importance of individual acts. But all of them interpreted their experience much more in terms of personal decisions and attitudes than in terms of impersonal social forces. When writing *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War*, especially in passages discussing the failure of republican era reforms, and in passages discussing acts of fanatical and senseless cruelty during the war, I was deeply, if at the time unintentionally, influenced by those many readings and many conversations emphasizing the importance of subjective human motives.

In my later work, *The Concise History*, and the introduction and explanatory notes for the anthology of documents, *Entre la reforma y la revolución*, the emphasis is more on social and economic forces and less on persons. I am inclined to attribute the change as much to my personal experience as to the reading of much new economic and social history in connection with my teaching duties. My political and administrative experiences in the University of California took place under two successive governors, Ronald Reagan and Jerry Brown, who repeatedly slashed the proposed operating budget of the university. The equipping of laboratories and libraries costs a great deal of money and does not, at least in the immediate sense, win votes. As of the mid-sixties the salary scale of the UC was one of the highest in the country, and California industry was also doing very well. It therefore seemed perfectly feasible to cut the university budget, and to «wait and see» whether these cuts would affect the quality of the faculty and the applied science benefits to which state industry was accustomed. Through the 1970's the university slowly suffered attrition of its best faculty and thus of its national reputation. When, in 1982, a major industrial scientific corporation decided that Texas would be a more favorable area than San Diego because in the opinion of the corporation Texas treated its university better than did California, the governor and the state legislature began to treat the university far more favorably than during the entire seventeen years of my teaching and administrative activity. I did not take the matter personally, but I could not fail to note that one practical economic decision taken by an important industry was far more influential than all the educational plans and the persuasive efforts of a faculty concerned with intellectual quality and cultural values. As a matter of fact I continue to believe that education is the key to any general improvements in the quality of human existence, but I am equally convinced that the subjective motivations of individual leaders, no matter how intelligent, idealistic, and energetic, have only a marginal influence over economic and political decisions.

With regard to my second topic, the role of foreign troops and arms, my

views of their significance have not changed, but some of the quantitative estimates have. I believe just as firmly today as I did in 1965 that foreign intervention was decisive during the entire course of the war. The insurgent forces under General Mola in the north would have been stalled without the arrival of American oil. The forces under General Franco would have been unable to cross from North Africa without the arrival of Italian, and a little later, German transport and bombing planes. During the same early weeks of the war, the Salazar government in Portugal offered immediate port and rail facilities to the Insurgents, and the oil companies and port authorities at Tangier refused to sell oil or permit ship repairs to the republican navy. Without these key forms of foreign aid the generals would have been obliged in August 1936 to negotiate a settlement with the legitimate republican government.

Foreign aid to the republic was decisive for the initial defense of Madrid in November-December 1936. Without the first few dozen Soviet tanks and aircraft, without the handful of serviceable French airplanes, and without the example of disciplined infantry tactics supplied by the newly formed International Brigades, Madrid would almost surely have fallen. Throughout the years 1937 and 1938 foreign intervention continued to play a decisive role. Italian, German and Moorish troops were necessary to all the offensive operations of General Franco; likewise the Italian and German supplies of planes, tanks, motor vehicles, rifles and machine guns, and communications equipment. Italian submarines and surface ships constituted the bulk of the Nationalist Navy. The misnamed international policy of «Non-Intervention» effectively prevented the republic from buying arms anywhere except in the Soviet Union and on the black market while at the same time it permitted the massive and eventually victorious German - Italian - Portuguese intervention to proceed without hindrance. On the republican side Russian tanks and planes, and the International Brigades, were essential to the few brief offensive successes of the republic and to its long, dogged defense.

Many important studies of foreign intervention have appeared in the past twenty years, the most important being those of Robert Whealey, Angel Viñas, the brothers Jesús and Ramón Salas Larrazábal, John Coverdale, Michael Alpert, Willard Frank, Juan García Durán, Paul Preston, and Hugh Thomas in the appendix of his third edition in 1977. The principal changes which they have made in my quantitative understanding of foreign intervention can be summarized as follows: 50-100 fewer Italian planes than I had supposed in 1965, a revision in accord with the results of the studies of John Coverdale and the appendix of Hugh Thomas; a slightly larger total of German aircraft and about 100 more operational Russian planes in the battle of the Ebro; a probable total of Moorish troops somewhat higher than my original estimate. In 1965 I wrote that about 100,000 moors served in the Franquist army during the war as a

whole. But the studies of Charles R. Halstead indicate a total of 70-80.000 serving from late 1937 to the end of the war. Since the original moorish contingents suffered enormous casualties during the fall, 1936 march to Madrid, the actual siege of the city, and the battle of the Jarama in February, 1937, the total number of moors for the war must be somewhat over 100.000.

But slight changes in the probable numbers of foreign airplanes and moorish infantry are not really of great significance. Quantitatively speaking the most important difference concerns Italian naval participation. In 1965 I wrote that Italian submarines and Italian and German aircraft sank dozens of ships on their way to republican ports. But I had no quantitative information except for the fact that in late 1937 Italy was known to have transferred four destroyers and two submarines from her own to the Nationalist navy. The articles of Willard Frank and Juan García Durán, published in *Historia* 16 in 1977, show that Italy supplied some 56 submarines and 25 surface ships to the Franquist navy, and that Germany supplied about 140 cargo vessels.

With one exception my figures on personnel and land and air armaments, both in 1965 and in later writings, approximate closely the figures given by Hugh Thomas in his third edition appendix. That exception is the number of Soviet tanks and airplanes supplied to the republican army. Thomas gives totals of 900 tanks and 1.000 planes. The figure for tanks is based on the estimate made by the German military attache in Turkey. The attache could count the number of Russian freighters passing through the Dardanelles, but he could not see what was below decks. We have no way of knowing what his other sources of information were, and no other documents have been cited in the half century since the events. On the other hand, none of the many able military correspondents covering the civil war ever mentioned seeing more than about 100 tanks even at the moments of maximum republican concentration such as at Brunete, Teruel, and the Ebro. Tanks are very difficult objects to hide, and so on the basis of experienced journalistic observation during the war itself I very much doubt that anything like 900 Russian tanks arrived in Spain. The estimate of Angel Viñas, about 400, seems much more reasonable, and makes ample allowance for instances that may not have been reported by the press.

The figure of 1.000 for aircraft relies heavily on the reasoning of General Jesús Larrazábal, to the effect that airplane motors are numbered consecutively without gaps, but manufacturers often skip 10's or even 100's of numbers, for a variety of reasons, and thus his method of counting paper numbers does not seem to me as convincing as field observations which allot the republic 2-300 operational planes at moments of maximum effort such as Brunete and the Ebro. The republican aviation colonel Andrés García Lacalle, in his 1973 memoirs published in Mexico, speaks of a maximum of 5-600 fighter planes and

100 heavy bombers. Commenting on a reference by Salas to 100 I-16's supposedly assembled at Alicante, García Lacalle states that none of these fuselages ever had a motor or armament installed. I am therefore inclined to continue thinking that 700 would be the proper approximation rather than 1.000 for the total of operational Soviet planes. I discussed quantities of Soviet aid in more detail on pp. 10-12 of the 1977 Critica edition of *La República española y la Guerra Civil* and pp. 393-4 of *Entre la reforma y la revolución*.

The most important quantitative change in my views since 1965 has to do with the category of reprisal shootings on both sides. I now believe that my first estimates were at least twice too high for the number of executions by the victorious military and twice too low for the paseos perpetrated by the violent minority within the Popular Front. Before discussing the changed numbers I would like to summarize the reasons why I believed, and continue to believe, that the Right its enemies in far greater numbers than did the Left:

1. The insurgen military were conscious of being a small minority attacking a popular government. Nothing shows this more clearly than their frequent use of the slogan «Viva la república» to bring their troops out of the barracks and to confuse or tranquillize the civilian populace.

2. When their pronunciamiento failed they found themselves with relatively few troops, and felt it necessary to consolidate their hostile rearguard in Andalusia, Extremadura, Galicia, and Asturias by a policy of swift terror.

3. A large percentage of the population were by definition their enemies: the republican middle class, the masons, teachers, intellectuals, and all members of UGT or CNT syndicates.

4. They pictured themselves as conducting a surgical operation on a gravely ill patria. They were going to eradicate physically the ills of Marxism and atheism, and this fanatical psychology of a cleansing purge applied both to the military and to the priesthood.

5. They refused all forms of political asylum. There were no public protests against the mass executions, and until at least late 1941 they exalted the examples of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany as well as the inquisitorial tradition of the Catholic Kings.

Regarding now the phenomenon of Popular Front zone paseos:

1. They were the work of two small minorities within the Popular Front, the faction of the anarchists who believed in assassination as a normal technique of social struggle, and the apparatchiks who were purging their fellow leftists at the orders of Stalin's secret police and Comintern agents.

2. The category of enemies was numerically small: priests, civil guards, pre-July Falange members, landlords, empresarios, strike breakers for the anarchist squads; the POUM, and any presumably anti-Stalinist leadership within the trade unions and the International Brigades, for the agents of Stalin.

3. The republican government broadcast repeated warnings against all forms of terrorism, facilitated exit visas for hundreds of threatened families, and permitted foreign embassies to rent extra buildings in which to house political refugees.

4. The socialist, communist, POUM, and anarchist press all strongly condemned the paseos as a disgrace to the cause of republican Spain.

The above are the reasons for which I have always been convinced that the Right murdered its enemies in much greater numbers than did the Left. But my quantitative estimates have changed greatly due to the availability of better demographic information and of detailed studies of some of the civil war repressions. In 1965 I assumed the possible validity of the estimate made in Jesús Villar Salinas, *Repercusiones demográficas de la última Guerra Civil española* (Madrid, 1942) an estimate of some 800.000 deaths from all causes. My own total was for some 580.000, and it thus seemed to me at the time that I was already reducing considerably a respected demographer's conclusion. Later studies, in particular those of Jordi Nadal, led me to think that the likely total would fall in the range of 3-400.000 deaths from all causes. Most recently, post-dating all of my writings on the subject, Amando de Miguel on p. 193 of *Socialismo y Guerra Civil*, Ed. Pablo Iglesias, 1987, advances a figure of 443.000 total deaths, of which about 200.000 would be men between the ages of 15 and 29. He, and also Ramón Salas Larrazábal in his many publications concerning civil war deaths, attribute many more deaths to disease than have I. I do not have any dogmatic attachment to my own estimates, but one reason for my low estimate, 50.000, is that foreign doctors and Quaker representatives in Spain during the war were deeply impressed by the careful attention to hygiene, and there are no press reports of epidemics such as the typhus epidemics in both the First and Second World Wars.

The principal motive for raising my estimate of paseos from 20.000 to perhaps 50.000 was the reading of Josep M.<sup>a</sup> Solé i Sabaté i Joan Villarroya i Font, *La repressió a la guerra i la posguerra a la comarca del Maresme* (Monserrat, 1983). The book proves that far more assassinations occurred in a small area north of Barcelona than would ever have been credible to me without such incontrovertible evidence. And what occurred in the maresme must surely have occurred in other parts of Catalunya and the Levant where anarchist terrorism continued sporadically throughout the two and one half year struggle. A secondary but not negligible factor in my changed estimate is also my evolving views of the history through which I have lived. In the 1940's and '50's my intense antifascist and anti-right wing dictatorship sentiments, combined with an extremely skeptical attitude towards all anti-communist and anti-libertarian accusations, led me to minimize any quantitative estimate of Stalinist or anarchist violence even though I knew and always acknowledged the existence of

such assassinations. I tended to believe that only Hitler, Stalin, the worst Latin American dictators, and Franco in his first eight years, had engaged in mass killings of their political opponents. I gave the benefit of the doubt to the many undemocratic Asian and African governments emerging with the retreat of European imperialism. In the light of various massacres in Indonesia, Biafra, the Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Iran, Pakistan, India, etc. I have painfully but definitely arrived at the conclusion that leftist and progresista governments and movements of so-called religious or national liberation can murder on the same massive scale as did Hitler, Stalin, and Franco. Thus the evidence of world history in the past 20-25 years has prepared me to accept the evidence in Solé and Villaroya's book. At the same time, other local studies of nationalist zone repressions very much confirm my early views of the Franquist repression. For the reader who is interested in the full detail of my evolving views, here are the relevant references: pp. 455-66 (written in 1964) and pp. 12-14 (the 1976 preface) of the Critica edition of *La República española y la Guerra Civil*; pp. 387-92 of *Entre la reforma y la revolución*, Ed. Critica, 1980; pp. 11-13 and 155-6 of the 1986 edition of *Breve historia de la Guerra Civil española*.

Finally I would like briefly to speak of changing interpretations of the short-lived second republic which was destroyed by the civil war. I have separated this question from the other three subjects of discussion because in this instance I am not referring so much to changes in my own views as to changes in the prevailing views among practicing historians and political commentators. As of 1965 censorship was still very strong in Spain, and the only published versions of civil war history were clearly and unequivocally those of the victors. These versions, with the exception of a few serious military histories, were little more than caricatures, at least in regard to politics, economics, and international diplomacy. The republican leaders were referred to scornfully as «maricones», «fracasados», and «resentidos». Their programs were said to reflect either the plots of international masonry or of international bolshevism, or both. Nor were the exile publications of the Left much more favorable in their interpretation of the republic. For both Marxists and anarchists the republic had tried to impose an outworn bourgeois model instead of proceeding to the revolution which «History» required and which the majority of the Spanish people presumably wanted. The constitution of 1931 and the legislative accomplishments of the republican-socialist coalition led by Prime Minister Manuel Azaña were criticized as mere timid beginnings of the necessary transformation of Spain. Azaña was jokingly referred to as the «Kerensky» of the Spanish revolution, or as a statesman «with a brilliant future in the past».

The relaxation of censorship in the late 1960's, the opening towards European intellectual currents, sentiments of simple dignity among conservatives examining their own history, and the general discrediting of fascist ideology, all

contributed to the discredit of the caricatural versions such as those of Joaquín Arrarás and Eduardo Comín Colomer. On the Left, the disappointing experiences of «socialismo real» in eastern Europe and the varied political and economic failures of so many Third World governments, has induced a more nuanced view of the shortcomings of the Spanish republic. World experience of the past few decades has convinced many Marxists that capitalism still has a vital historical role to play whereas the Marxists who lived through the civil war and those who wrote in the forties tended to think of capitalism as a «system with a brilliant future in the past», if I may paraphrase the humorous reference to Azaña.

In the years since c. 1970 right of center historians such as Carlos Seco Serrano and Javier Tussell, and left of center historians such as Santos Juliá and Antonio Elorza, have created an entirely new, and much superior, historiography concerning the republic and the relation between the actions of republican governments and the eventual outbreak of the civil war. They do not in any sense hide the failures of republican leadership or of party and union politics, but they treat their subjects with dignity and comprehension; and more important, they use documents honestly and not as bits and rags of propaganda. It thus becomes possible to see the republic not as a failed forerunner to bolshevism or anarchist collectivism, but as the first serious effort to bring a substantial measure of political and religious liberty, social justice, regional autonomy, and a mixed economy to Spain as a nation in the early stages of bourgeois democratic development. I am especially happy in retrospect that my own valuation of the republic from my earliest writings was in accord with this later high quality Spanish historiography. I have treated the revaluation of the republic more extensively in the chapter which I contributed to the volume edited by Ramón Tamames, *La Guerra Civil Española, una reflexión moral 50 años después* (Planeta, 1986).