



The Spanish War and its aftermath

military-Earth thinking notebook

Le Lieutenant-colonel GERVAIS

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The Spanish Civil War could have remained a peripheral event among the many upheavals in Europe in the 1930s if it had been only a confrontation between Spaniards for the termination of their future political regime, or if it had been over in a matter of weeks, to the benefit of one side or the other, as many observers - or actors - considered likely.

On the contrary, it owed its considerable repercussion to its duration, to foreign interference of all kinds which it gave rise to and which was decisive in its development. It was also due to the fact that it led to a regime which was both abominably repressive and the most stable that Spain had known since the Napoleonic invasions. Paradoxically, it became a taboo subject in Spain from the very beginning of the democratic transition, so as not to jeopardize its success, which was anything but a foregone conclusion.

Drawing on the testimony of the last survivors, on archives that are gradually opening up, and on an abundant but often partisan historiography, Bartolomé Bennassar proposes to produce a synthesis of the history of the last survivors of the war. The aim is to produce a synthesis, as dispassionate as possible, on the conflict itself and its aftermath, with a particular interest in the emigration triggered by the nationalist victory of 1939.

The fundamental causes of this drama are poverty, economic underdevelopment and social frustration. In the 19th century, after the loss of its empire, Spain no longer counted in the world. Its chronic political instability prevented any economic and social progress, all the more so as for many the idea of reform was still associated with that of the Frenchman, a disgraced invader. The urban proletariat, few in number, is very radical and makes common cause with the miserable rural masses. Social violence is becoming commonplace.

The 1920s and 30s, with the coup d'état of Miguel Primo de Rivera, and then the republican period, reveal that no organized force was ready to take over a monarchy that had been permanently discredited. In a climate of leftist overbidding, the 1936 elections were indecisive and contested by all sides. The state's decay and anticlerical provocations outraged the middle classes. From then on, the race for war was launched, despite the initial caution of the high military hierarchy and of General Franco in particular, while the war was still going on. Some of the left-wing movements called for a military uprising which they hoped to crush easily to ensure the triumph of the Revolution.

From the well known account of the operations, whose objective passes rather quickly from a total annihilation of the adversary to a stubborn conquest/resistance to the rhythm of provincial rallies to the "Movement" or increasingly desperate legalistic counter-offensives, or will focus on three omnipresent themes throughout the pages:

- the expression of an irreducible antagonism between two camps that everything opposed, an ultra-Catholic crusade against communist or libertarian revolution, apart from belonging to the same nation (although Catalan, Basque and Navarrese particularisms played an important role),
- the role of military laboratory in fields as diverse as intelligence, logistics (the first airlift in history took the Moroccan army to the peninsula), materiel (tanks, planes) and its use (the tactical skill of the Spanish or foreign nationalist leaders thwarted the intrinsic superiority of the Soviet armoured tanks), disinformation and psychological action...
- the importance of internal interference, whether in terms of support in terms of men (international brigades against Italian volunteers in particular) or weapons, both sides being almost equally powerless in this area at the beginning of the conflict. B. Bennassar describes the steps taken by the Republican or nationalist emissaries to their "natural" external supporters and contrasts the attitude of Hitler and Mussolini, who never gave Franco a gift but constantly sought to win the war for him, to that of Stalin, who gradually lost interest in Spain as the republican government spread its divisions (for which the actions of Soviet agents were largely responsible) and demonstrated its inability to win the war. On the other hand, Great Britain was initially rather favorable to the "Movement," which determined the attitude of France and Italy in opposite directions.

One of the most widespread images of this conflict is that of the procession of atrocities against the civilian population with which it was accompanied. B. Bennassar shows that most of the atrocities were committed in the first months of the conflict and were fairly distributed between the two sides, with some of the atrocities being committed by the French and the Italians. Some categories paid a particularly heavy price (Asturian workers and teachers on the one hand, landowners and clergy on the other, local elected representatives and notables from both sides, etc.). But the historian insists above all on the absence of any desire for national reconciliation in Franco (unlike some of his generals). Not only did the Generalissimo reject all offers of honourable surrender when his victory was assured, but his regime instituted a repression as fierce as it was petty towards those who in most cases had only obeyed a formally legitimate government, even their children: Full amnesty was not proclaimed until 1969. This lack of generosity is difficult to explain by ideology, as the political or religious convictions of the Caudillo are vague and generally considered to be lukewarm; in any case, it deprived the country of the opportunity to develop its own identity. In any case, he deprived the country of part of its vital forces by precipitating millions of Spaniards into a resistance of survival (until the 1950s), an underground existence, a sometimes definitive exile^[1] and even later into terrorism.

Because of the number of European intellectuals who fought against it, and the abundant literature (from Bernanos to Hemingway) that it inspired, it has become a major source of inspiration for the Spanish people. The Spanish Civil War could be characterized as "the last romantic war, made not of battles but of tragedies". Our author shows that it was certainly the first ideological war, few writers having, like George Orwell, resisted the temptation to reduce it to a "Red versus Fascist" confrontation. It was also a war of utopia, which profoundly shaped Spanish society but also provided a lasting reference, for better or for worse, to the post-1945 European left (remember the Rajk, Slansky and Dimitrov trials, among others). Even if the chronological proximity of the Second World War leads us to underestimate its importance, it remains an essential episode for the understanding of the history of our continent.

1) The book provides a particularly well-documented description of the conditions of reception, settlement and sometimes return of emigrants who crossed the French border.

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