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The Spanish Civil War Eighty Years On: Discourse, Memory and the Media

Introduction to the Special Issue

This special issue was conceived to mark a specific landmark event: the eightieth anniversary of the beginning of the Spanish Civil War on 18 July 2016. The emotional resonance of this conflict is still felt, far beyond the borders of modern Spain, in part because foreign intervention brought so many individuals into contact with the country and its people. To some degree, the testimonies of those who were drawn to fight on Spanish soil have taken precedence over the memories of the native population: this tendency can be explained not only because of the powerful symbolism of a popular narrative (a fledgling democracy locked in an unequal struggle with fascism), but also because the recollections of the Spanish Left were suppressed by the victorious Nationalists. In addition, there is the question of self-censorship and the wish to escape painful memories. As noted by Jelin, every attempt to preserve and celebrate memory includes an inherent desire to forget: when we select and emphasise a given version of the past, there are always other narratives that are

disadvantaged (Jelin 2002: 30). Our goal, therefore, is to seize the opportunity provided by this anniversary to illuminate aspects of Spain's recent past that have received limited attention, by presenting a collection of articles that bring to the fore the latest perspectives on the cultural, historical, regional, political and social heritage of the Civil War and its legacy.

The legacy of the Spanish Civil War is not only determined by the losses that were suffered during the armed conflict itself (1936-1939), but also by its aftermath: a thirty-six-year dictatorship that perpetuated the victory of the winners and the subjugation of the defeated (1939-1975). It is, perhaps, too easy to forget one of the more disturbing outcomes of the Second World War, starkly apparent to those who inhabited the post-war period: in the East, the totalitarian system seemed to have been strengthened by the victory of the Allies, while in the West more than one dictatorship appeared to thrive at the very heart of the 'democratic' system. Among these, perhaps the most astonishing survival was that of Franco's Spain. Even though the roots of the Spanish conflict can be found within its own history (particularly, the military coup that led to the development of the armed struggle), the harm caused by the interference of belligerent foreign powers (matched by the deliberate negligence of those forces that were supposed to empathise with the plight of a beleaguered democracy), produced a moral deficit that has persisted to this day.

The almost obsessive focus on the Spanish Civil War is therefore not merely an historical matter, because the postwar era demonstrated, almost as a universal principle, the hollowness of democratic engagement with dictatorial governments. The stance taken by the 'West' towards post-war Spain was echoed repeatedly in its attitude to other regimes, most notably those that existed in Apartheid South Africa, Portugal, and Greece, quite apart from the uncannily similar case represented by the Chilean coup of 1973. Meanwhile, from the very beginning of Franco's regime, the victors engaged in a thorough and devastating purge of all and indeed any dissenting ideologies: this involved, not just the removal of people from

office, but the physical persecution of anyone who was suspected of sympathizing with the Republican cause. This form of internal terrorism not only marked the course of the dictatorship, but was sanctioned retrospectively by the ‘pact of silence’ that was agreed during the supposed Transition to democracy (see Fernández 2002). The decision to pursue this lamentable course, meant that the problems caused by the Civil War and the dictatorship remained unresolved long after Franco’s death, maintaining the deep-rooted divisions that persist in contemporary Spain.

It was only approximately thirty years after Franco’s death that the recovery of memory was promoted through social, political, and cultural means, so that the unheard voices of the past began to gain attention. This development, however, remains highly contentious, since reference to the struggles of the past tends to re-ignite long-standing controversies, the resolution of which is difficult because the contemporary political frame is poorly equipped to deal with them. The Law of Historical Memory, for example, provides guidelines on several issues related to memory, from the exhumation of mass graves to the alteration of street names intended to eliminate references to agents of the dictatorship. However, the politicization and limited application of this Law by the Spanish Government has led to the further polarization of political perspectives, while at the same time as thousands of families are still looking for the graves of those relatives who suffered (in many cases) extra judicial execution. Based on this determinedly national context, this special issue considers Memory as yet another site of struggle, a contemporary re-enactment of the old divisions that are very much part of the country’s identity and which still permeate social, political and cultural life in contemporary Spain. Our collection of articles acknowledges, therefore, the reproduction of these tensions, offering clear-sighted accounts of the conflict and its legacy, grounded in a variety of historical and political discourses, oral testimonies, and analyses of media outputs.

With contributions by both Spanish and International authors, this issue not only highlights the fact that the Spanish Civil War still remains – eighty years later – a hotly debated topic, but also illustrates the extent to which it animates scholars who, though painstakingly objective, are nonetheless committed to social justice. ‘The Spanish Civil War 80 years on: discourse, memory and the media’ provides a critical contribution to this popular and dynamic field of research, with the purpose of examining the political discourses that have shaped and continue to shape our understanding of the conflict. Our authors focus on the propaganda of the period, and the use of contested ideological concepts by the various protagonists, while reviewing the key arguments in relation to the memories and ‘postmemories’ of the Civil War itself. They offer, in addition, analysis of some of the most significant representations of the conflict and its legacies in Catalan, Spanish and International media. In doing so, this special issue examines the various intersections that exist between memory and its mediated, generational and ideological aspects, all of which resurface in the oral testimonies provided by victims and their relatives. These perspectives are not necessarily reflected, however, in the themes that emerge in public discourse, in the sense that that different media outputs and platforms may choose to emphasise particular points of view, perpetuating some of the dominant myths that attach to this period.

Even though Memory Studies is rooted in Sociology, our contributors have embraced a wider variety of research perspectives and frameworks from other fields, such as historiography, media and cultural studies, anthropology, political science and literature (see for example Assmann and Shortt 2012; Connerton 1989; Cubitt 2007; Erll and Nünning 2010 for a general background). Reflecting on various memory practices, including oral testimonies and various media and literary outputs, this special issue is strongly interdisciplinary, both in its content and its intention. Despite the multiplicity of approaches

and the variety of units of analysis, the contributions can be structured around a number of interrelated areas.

Ruth Sanz Sabido opens with an article on local memories of Franco's repression in an Andalusian village. In this ethnographic study, the author highlights the importance of orality in giving expression to testimonies that have previously been silenced, thereby acting as a counter-mechanism that can offset the imposition of state-approved memories. In addition, this insight into the perspectives of a close-knit local community, provides a vital corrective to those more general accounts, however sympathetic, that concentrate on the place of the War in an International context. Although Sanz Sabido is fully aware of this tradition, it is her intention to address the imbalance between all kinds of official history, and the marginalised voices of the oppressed. The articles that follow move away from first-hand experiences to focus on the concept of postmemory, or that form of memory acquired in the process of re-signifying the past. Attending to the generational transmission, re-elaboration and representation of memory, these contributions examine various cultural productions in order to identify new ethical and aesthetic ways of recovering past times. In this respect, Carlota Coronado discusses the production, since 2000, of short Spanish films by the grandchildren of the war, placing them in contrast to previous material created by older generations. She notes that, for those Spaniards who have no direct memory of the war, its associations are formed through narrative forms that may include the recollections of relatives and, significantly, a variety of media outputs encountered since childhood: Coronado argues that, over time, there is a distinct movement from 'collective' memory, passed from eyewitnesses to younger generations, to a broader 'cultural' memory, which does not depend on the presence of the original protagonists.

Similarly, from the perspective of comparative literature, Mariela Sánchez analyses a sample of Spanish and Argentinian novels which, set during the Civil War, are written from

the generational distance that exists between the authors and the facts they evoke. The production of this kind of literature is not, however, a completely ‘fictional’ exercise, since the existence of large amounts of factual sources means that the texts concerned display the influence of biographical, historical and representational matter, without which the narratives produced would seem less convincing and compelling. The stories recognise, therefore, the power of oral recollections, and documentary forms such as letters and diaries, using these devices to reinforce their social and political messages. In the last article of this section, José Carlos Rueda and Elena Galán focus on seven graphic novels that offer reminiscences (from autobiographical standpoints) about certain episodes of Spain’s recent past. In doing so, the authors underline the significance of family recollections in the re-signification of collective memory. After discussing the creative space occupied by comics and graphic material, within the broader framework of the cultural industries, these authors distinguish between the martial fantasies circulated during the dictatorship, and the more nuanced material produced by those sympathetic to the Republican cause.

In the following section, we consider the connections between memory and gender, particularly in relation to the memory practices and the mechanisms of repression and historicisation carried out by forms of male authority. Laia Quílez examines the role of women in the anti-Francoist resistance, represented in Carolina Astudillo’s documentary productions (for an account of women’s experiences in the War, see González 1995). Astudillo’s work, such as *De Monstruos y faldas* and *El gran vuelo*, denounce the various forms of gender-based discrimination that militant women suffered in postwar Spain, making their struggle against Francoism even more difficult. One notable feature of Astudillo’s output is its use of ‘found’ material, in which the viewer is presented with excerpts from home movies from the 30s and 40s, in a context that calls into question the gendered relations of the period. The main, though almost invisible protagonist in the film, is Clara Pueyo Jornet, a communist

militant who disappeared in 1943. Astudillo's project is to address the sexism that continues to dominate the 'imaginary' associated with the Civil War.

In addition to its interdisciplinarity, the special issue is also characterized, particularly in its third section, by the transnational approach taken by some of its contributors, through a set of comparative analyses between Spain and other historical and geographical contexts. Enrique Fibla explores the cultural influence, from 1920, of Soviet cinema on Spanish films before the Civil War. At that point, Soviet aesthetics were introduced alongside the radicalization of the cultural scene in Spain, marking in some respects a movement away from 'bourgeois' models of practice towards a more working-class orientation (for a strong contextual account of Soviet political culture, see Schlogel 2012). The machinations of the Comintern, however, and the shifting allegiances of the period – including, especially, Stalin's eventual turn to 'socialist realism' – set particular limits to the development of an independent leftist cinema, which came to a premature end with the Nationalist victory in 1939. Following a similar agenda (the effect of International politics on Spanish culture), Jürgen Wilke examines the media discourses issued by the Nazi propaganda machine in the German press in the 1930s. Using framing analysis, Wilke discusses the ways in which the Nazi promoted specific views about the events in Spain in order to justify the participation of Germany in the Civil War on the Nationalist side. This transnational-comparative approach is also pursued by Mark Houssart, whose article delves into the political significance of Joris Ivens' documentary *Spanish Earth*, which was released in 1937. Houssart not only considers the relevance of the film within the context of the Civil War, but also explores the reception it received in the United States and Britain.

Throughout the articles mentioned above, we cover a variety of cultural artefacts, from novels to films. In the fourth section of this special issue, we include two additional pieces that, based on the analysis of television programmes and board games, use different

media platforms to provide further insight into the representations of the conflict. In this respect, Elena Cueto's article pays attention to the configurations and re-configurations of the bombing of Guernica, as this event was presented in a number of television documentaries. Guernica is clearly understood as a landmark of memory, and as a paradigmatic space for the commemoration and institutionalization of the collective imaginary of the War. Cueto considers the fact that multiple interpretative communities are bound to understand the war in different ways. The final article, authored by Jan Gonzalo, examines the ludic structure of two board games about the Civil War, and reflects on the importance of these productions in the construction of specific narratives of the recent past. Once again, one important theme that emerges from the analysis, is the inevitable fact that the war is re-interpreted by those (in this case, the designers of the games) who did not experience it first-hand. In addition, it is particularly interesting to note that established assumptions about the war (the supposedly amateur nature of the early Republican efforts, for example), appear in some cases to restrict the dimensions of the 'game' that players can pursue. The tension between a sense of historical determination, and the opposing force of 'counter-factual' narratives, emerges in Gonzalo's analysis.

In addition to the full articles, the special issue also features three discussions that take the form of Viewpoint essays, all of which contribute to the debates outlined above and add further depth to the relationship between them. First, Maria José Romano and Enric Castelló examine the documentary *Perseguits i salvats. Camins de nit i boira* against the backdrop of Televisió de Catalunya's policy of historical memory. Addressing the view that community narratives define both the present (through its contemporary identity) and the past (through forms of memory), these authors argue that a clear international perspective underlies the televised material they discuss, particularly with regard to the place of Catalan

memory in relation to European audiences' understanding of major acts of violence and repression, such as the Holocaust.

This is followed by Sergio Villanueva Baselga's piece on the influence of the Spanish Civil War on the development of Neorealist Greek Cinema, which grew after the end of the Greek Civil War in 1949. Focusing on the work of Nikos Koundouros and, more specifically, his film *To Potami*, the author discusses the similar historical trajectories shared by Greece and Spain, framing them under the conceptual framework provided by the notion of 'Southern Europe'. Last, but not least, David A. Messenger's article examines the 'cultural genocide' endured by the Catalan people in the context of Franco's broader programme of repression across Spain. In Catalonia, any signs that might challenge the unity of the Spanish nation (such as the Catalan flag, language and statute of autonomy) was abolished or subdued. Messenger further emphasises, as other articles also do, the damage that the 'pact of silence' and the 1977 Amnesty Act did to the long-term development of the democratic system that emerged from the wreckage produced by Franco's regime.

This special edition is part of three broader research projects: "Legacies of the Spanish Civil War: Local Memories, Media Representations and Community Engagement" (Canterbury Christ Church University), "Memory and Ideology in the Spanish Civil War" (De Montfort University and Canterbury Christ Church University), and "Second-Degree Memories: Postmemory of the Civil War, Francoism and Democratic Transition in Contemporary Spain" (supported by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, CSO2013-41594-P).

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