

July 19, 2006

The Spanish Civil War, 70 Years On: The Deafening Silence on Franco's Genocide

By VICENTE NAVARRO

Editors' note: 70 Years ago this week, General Franco launched his attack on the Spanish Republic, backed by Hitler, Mussolini and, tacitly, by the US and other Western powers. Across the next few days and weeks we will be publishing articles on this pivotal struggle, and the imperishable gallantry of the Republic's defenders. We start with a overview by Vicente Navarro of the enduring significance of the Fascist onslaught and the malign tenacity of Franco's admirers to this day in burying his crimes while seeking to renew his objectives. AC / JSC.

Barcelona, Catalonia

The Spanish Civil War , launched by the military Fascist coup, on July 18, 1936 was the first act of World War II. The cast of characters that shaped and appeared in World War II first came together in Spain. The Civil War, like World War II, was a war between progressive forces and the axis of evil of that day--fascism, Nazism, and reaction. Interestingly, though, in the Spanish war the Western democracies stood to one side or, even worse, indirectly assisted on the fascist side. Why?

To answer this question, we need to understand what happened in Spain before the coup led by General Franco, which took place on July 18, 1936. That coup interrupted the most progressive and modernizing government seen in Spain in the first half of the twentieth century. The II Republic, established in 1931, put in place some of the most important reforms that Spanish society has ever seen: It established reforms of the public school system, which were opposed by the Church, until that time in control of most of the educational system. It introduced much-needed land reforms, which went against the interests of the large landowners and the oligarchy (including the Church). It instituted social security reforms, which were opposed by the banking and private insurance companies (Juan March, Spain's foremost banker and leader of the Liberal Party, financed the military coup). It established women's suffrage, years before many other western European countries. It introduced labor rights, which were opposed by large industrialists, such as Cambo, a leader of the Catalan nationalist and liberal forces. It established the divorce law and the right to abortion, actions that further antagonized the Church. And it put in place many other reforms that made Spain a major point of reference for progressive forces throughout Europe.

Then, in 1936, an alliance of left-wing and center parties (the Popular Front) was elected to the Spanish Parliament, with a program that expanded and solidified the reforms carried out by the first government of the II Republic (1931-1933). Just months later, all those forces that had kept Spain one of the most backward countries in Europe, and whose privileges had been curtailed by the Republic's

reforms, came together to instigate a military coup, led by General Franco. The coup was actively supported by Hitler and Mussolini, who provided Franco with all manner of military equipment and support. Even though Franco presented himself as the defender of Spain, and the fascist forces called themselves the "nationalists," most of Franco's troops that invaded the south of Spain were actually foreign fighters, including Foreign Legion and Moorish troops, mercenaries from Morocco. As the British historian Herbert Graham has noted, it is paradoxical that "the Spanish crusade to defend Christian civilization--were led by Islamic mercenaries." The Moorish general, Mohamed Mizzian, who led these forces, known for their enormous cruelty, was recently paid homage in Morocco at an event attended by the Spanish ambassador, Luis Planas, and by two generals of the Spanish Army.

American journalist John Whittaker wrote of an encounter with General Mizzian: "I met this general near Navalcarrero when his troops threw two girls of less than 20 years to his feet. He discovered in the pocket of one of them a trade union card. He took her to the public school of the village where forty Moorish soldiers were resting. He threw her to them." A huge cry resonated in the building, writes Whittaker, horrified by what he saw. General Mizzian smiled and dismissed Whittaker's protest by saying, "She will not survive more than four hours." Neither the Spanish ambassador nor the two Spanish generals who paid homage to such an assassin were dismissed by the current Spanish socialist government.

The huge military support that Franco received from Hitler and Mussolini was in stark contrast to the lack of support from the Western democracies for the first democratic regime in Spain in the twentieth century. They did not move a finger to help. Their inaction in the face of the massive military support for the fascist troops from Hitler and Mussolini should have been offensive to any person with democratic sensibilities. What explains this failure to act? It was class interests. None other than Winston Churchill put it clearly when he said (as related in Helen Graham's *A Brief History of the Spanish Civil War*) that the Western democracies put their class interests--their fear that the left-wing reforms carried out by the Republican government would be attractive to their own popular classes, contaminating them with a desire to change their own societies--ahead of their national and geopolitical interests: opposing Nazism and fascism in Spain. The reality is that the dominant classes of the Western democracies were more comfortable with a fascist regime in Spain (a strong defender of reaction and the status quo) than with the reform policies of a democratic Spanish government.

With the victory of fascism in 1939, a nightmare of repression began. In just five years, nearly 200,000 people were assassinated (according to the Minister of Justice in Franco's government, assassinations were recorded as executions or deaths in concentration camps). The fascists knew that the majority of the Spanish people opposed them and openly called for what they called "healthy terrorism." Indeed, it took three years for the heavily armed fascist forces to defeat the popular resistance led by the Republican government, which had few armaments at its disposal. (On some fronts, the Republicans had just one rifle for every two soldiers.) The fascist generals spoke openly of the need to terrorize a population that they knew opposed them. According to Edward Malefakis, professor of European history at Columbia University, for every assassination committed by Mussolini, Franco committed 10,000. The terror was even greater than that carried out in Chile by Pinochet, a student of Franco at the Spanish military academy. (Even today, Franco's statue presides over the entrance to the academy.)

The cruelty reached unheard-of dimensions, such as the killing of parents so that the assassins could adopt their young children. The brutality and bestiality of the fascist forces was well illustrated by the response of the head of the Spanish Foreign Legion, General Millan Astray, to a critical speech by Miguel de Unamuno,

President of Salamanca University (the oldest university in Europe), in a meeting that Astray attended. Unamuno was a liberal intellectual who had supported the fascist coup because he was afraid of the working-class mobilizations. The brutal repression by the fascist forces, however, had shocked and disillusioned him. He denounced the repression by Franco's forces, with the famous statement, "You will win but you will not convince because even though you have the brutal force, you don't have the reason." General Astray responded by yelling at him, "Long live death! Down with intelligence!" This became the slogan of a fascist regime that was responsible for genocide of overwhelming brutality.

And all this was done with the active involvement of the Catholic Church. In every village, town, and city, it was the Spanish Church hierarchy (which had called for a military coup during the Republican government) and the priests who prepared the lists of people to be executed. A primary target of the repression was teachers, considered major enemies by the Church. Its active opposition to the popular reforms by the Spanish republican governments, and its calling on the Army to rebel against the popularly elected government, explains the fury felt by large sectors of the working class, led by anarcho-syndicalists, toward the Church. The day after Franco's coup, large numbers of people decided to take justice into their own hands, burning churches and killing priests. These violations took place against the wishes of the democratic state, which actively opposed such actions. Terror was never a policy of the Republic. It was, however, part and parcel of the fascist state.

And the terror of the fascist regime never ended. Political assassinations took place regularly. Just a few months before his death in 1975, Franco signed orders for five executions that were politically motivated.

The Franco Dictatorship and the Transition to Democracy
The Western democracies that had remained silent during Franco's coup openly supported his government, regarding Franco as their ally against the Soviet Union. The Cold War was the excuse used by the Western democracies (led by the U.S. government and the Vatican) to support horrible dictatorships--like Franco's--that imposed economic, cultural, and political backwardness on their countries. When Spain's dictator died in 1975, 85% of the country's adult population had no more than a primary school education. Public social expenditures were the lowest, by far, in Europe--even lower than in Greece and Portugal, which also suffered under ultra-right regimes.

When Franco died, the Army, the Church, and the land-owning oligarchy wanted to maintain fascism without Franco. The business and banking communities would have liked this, too, since they benefited enormously from the dictatorship, but they did not think it was possible. Their economic interests lay in the European Market, and Europe would not welcome a fascist regime in the community. Moreover, the working class had been mobilizing against a regime that denied them the most elementary rights of association (in 1975, Spain had the largest number of strikes in Europe). So, something needed to be done, and some changes had to be permitted to save the class power relations that existed during the dictatorship. But any political change had to take place--and indeed it did--under the dominion and hegemony of the right. The monarchy was established as the grantor of privileges that ensured the existing power relations would be maintained. The Church and the Army, for example, were granted special privileges under the new Constitution. Church-owned and Church-administered private schools were given the same weight in the school system as public schools, receiving a heavy subsidy from the state. And the Army was given the right to police the state, as guarantor of the social order and of "Spanish unity," a code name under fascism for dominance by a highly centralized and Jacobin state. Moreover, private property was granted a sacred status in the Constitution.

The Legacy of the Fascist Past in Today's Spain

The dominant sentiment about the past among Spain's conservative and Christian Democratic forces is that the military coup was needed to stop Communism. This vision of the past is promoted by President Bush's main ally in continental Europe, Aznar, and his party, the Popular Party (PP), whose Honorary President is Fraga Iribarne, Minister of the Interior during the Franco regime and responsible for the hated political police. The Church, usually referred to as the religious branch of the PP, has been even more vocal than the leadership of the PP in supporting Franco's coup and dictatorship. Even today, many churches in Spain still have monuments celebrating the coup.

The liberals have agreed with this reading of fascism as a bulwark against Communism--although they considered the dictatorship as perhaps too cruel and perhaps lasting too long. They would have preferred a short, clean coup. Even though they despised fascism, they thought it was necessary to stop an even worse enemy, Communism. The only difference between conservatives and Christian Democrats, on the one side, and liberals, on the other, is that the first group admired fascism and the second despised it. But they all needed it and justified it. It is interesting to note that the liberal branch of the right wing, which has had no ethical problem with defending the need for fascism, usually uses the works of Trotskyites and anarcho-syndicalists (such as George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* and Ken Loach's *Tierra y Libertad* (Land and Freedom)) to show that Communism was indeed the main enemy in Spain. These works greatly exaggerate the role and influence of the Communist Party in Spain and its dependence on the Soviet Union, portraying the Civil War as "a revolution betrayed by Communism and the Soviet Union." The reality was quite different. The Communist Party influence in Catalonia was relatively small, although it increased as a consequence of the Soviet Union being the only European country to provide military equipment to the Republic (with the result that most Spanish people never expressed anti-Soviet Union feelings). The International Brigades, with their 30,000 foreign soldiers, in all, during Civil War (1936-1939), played an important and heroic role, but their numbers at any given time (12,000) were small. In contrast, Mussolini sent 74,000 soldiers on the fascist side. The legitimate and democratically elected Catalan government (of which the Communist Party was a minor component) wanted to regain control of the major government communications agency controlled by the anarcho-syndicalists and Trotskyites, who resisted passing back control to the government. This generated conflict within the Republican forces that considerably weakened the military effort. Orwell, who did not know Catalonia (and did not speak Catalan or Spanish), became an "authority" on Catalonia--mistaking names and places while writing his book. Today, Orwell is the hero of those who, indulging in anti-Communism, ignore the real class struggle that took place in Spain.

At the end of Franco's dictatorship and the beginning of the democratic period, an amnesty was granted to the assassins who had killed, tortured, and robbed the democratic forces in Spain. Moreover, a "pact of silence" was agreed upon, a complete silence about the past, including the horrendous crimes of the Franco regime--a pact to forget what had happened in Spain. No other country in Europe has been as silent about its past as has Spain. The deaths of tens of thousands of anti-fascists remain unrecognized; 30,000 people simply disappeared, no one knowing where they were buried or discarded.

But that pact of silence was one-sided. The right wing has continued to pay homage to General Franco and his fascist forces. In many Spanish towns (except, again, in Catalonia and the Basque countries) there are still fascist monuments. Even left-wing municipal and regional governments are afraid to destroy them. And across Spain, there are frequent celebrations honoring the assassins. Recently, the PP

opposed a declaration by the European Parliament condemning the Spanish dictatorship, as did some ultra-rightists in Poland's government.

One of the major celebrators of the Franco regime is the Church, which unabashedly remains a strong supporter. The Spanish Church, supported by the Vatican, is the main adversary of the current socialist government under Zapatero, even calling for insurrection and asking Catholics to disobey Spanish laws passed by Parliament, such as the legalization of gay marriage and the adoption of children by homosexual couples, introduction of "fast track divorce," abolition of compulsory religious education in public schools, and authorization of stem cell research. All these laws have driven the Church to renew its crusade against the socialist government. The Church has also joined with top military figures in calling for maintaining "Spanish unity." And the Church and the Army opposed Zapatero's negotiations with ETA, the Basque separatist group. The recent visit by Pope Benedict XVI to Valencia to attend the International Conference of the Family was planned by the Spanish Catholic hierarchy as an open act of provocation and defiance toward the Spanish government. The regional government of Valencia, controlled by the PP, organized a lavish and very expensive reception for the Pope, in contrast to its lack of attention to maintaining the city's subway, responsible for the crash that killed 44 persons (most of them working class) one week before the Pope's visit.

Religious fundamentalism is isolating the Church in Spain. According to a recent poll, 80% of young people in Spain distrust the Church, even more than they distrust NATO or the business community. The proportion of youngsters who define themselves as Catholics has declined from 77% ten years ago to 49% today. Meanwhile, the Spanish Church, Opus Dei, and the Legionnaires of Christ (whose founder was a child abuser) are funding a statue of the Pope in Madrid--which is being created, incidentally, by the same sculptor--Juan de Avalos--who made the fascist monument, the Valley of the Fallen, outside Madrid.

Spain's socialist government committed itself, in its electoral program, to correct this silence, to recognize and pay homage to the victims of fascism, and to eliminate the laws that still refer to the freedom fighters, fighting against Franco's forces, as criminals. But the socialist government has not yet done this, and it seems to be postponing such actions, failing to keep its promises. So, the deafening silence on those terrible crimes remains. As indicated by Judge Juan Guzman (who brought General Pinochet to trial) and Judge Hugo Cañon (the Argentinean judge who brought military authorities to court) at a recent conference in Barcelona, the silence in Spain on the horrors of the Franco state is an insult to democratic forces throughout the world; it is a scandal that needs to be denounced. None of the Spanish media, incidentally, reported on the judges' declarations. Meanwhile, Spain's Judge Garzon, acclaimed worldwide for trying to get Pinochet extradited from Great Britain to stand trial in a Spanish court, remains silent about the amnesty that allows assassins to go free in Spain. Throughout Spain, and outside Spain, the deafening silence continues.

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