

2011

Review of: Stanley G. Payne *¿Por qué la República perdió la guerra?*

Michael Seidman

University of North Carolina, Willmington, Seidmanm@uncw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs>

---

**Recommended Citation**

Seidman, Michael (2011) "Review of: Stanley G. Payne *¿Por qué la República perdió la guerra?*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol35/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* by an authorized editor of Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. For more information, please contact [jesus@udel.edu](mailto:jesus@udel.edu).

Payne, Stanley G. *¿Por qué la República perdió la guerra?* Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 2010. 256 pp.

The debate over the democratic nature of the Second Republic (1931-39) is one of the liveliest in contemporary Spanish historiography. By critically examining Republican democracy, Stanley Payne poses the major political question of Spain in the 1930s: when did the democracy of the Second Republic end? Most of the left would answer that it ended in 1939 when Franco defeated the Republic. The response of the right is more divided. A few might choose 1931 with its approval of an anticlerical constitution; some might pick 1934, the year of the Asturias Insurrection; and others 1936 and the election of the Popular Front.

Payne's unparalleled command of Spanish and many other national historiographies as well as his extraordinary grasp of comparative politics allows him to place the Republican years within the framework of a struggle between tradition and modernity. This conflict reached its height in Europe during the first third of the twentieth century. Never before in human history had the convergence of modern ideas and events been so destabilizing and threatening to traditional society. Paradoxically, conservative Germany played a revolutionary role during the First World War. Germany aided rebellions against its Allied enemies in the Muslim territories of Great Britain, France, and Russia; shipped arms to Ireland; financed terrorism in Barcelona to disrupt Spanish war production destined for the Allies; and helped the Bolsheviks to take power in Russia.

World War I thus opened the era of revolutionary civil wars between "Whites" and "Reds." The first erupted in 1918 in Finland where General Carl-Gustaf Mannerheim organized the counter-revolutionary forces of the Finnish parliamentary government and crushed the Red enemy in three months. In the Hungarian civil war in 1919 the Bolshevized Béla Kun confronted counter-revolutionary domestic opposition and the more potent Rumanian army which—backed by the Allies—defeated his Soviet Republic. In Germany, a mini-civil war in which the counter-revolutionary Social Democrats employed the forces of the old regime to crush their left opposition resulted in the foundation of the Weimar Republic. In Italy "revolutionary" Fascists allied with the traditional right to overwhelm the extreme left. The greatest of these revolutionary-

counterrevolutionary civil wars was the Russian conflict (1918-21), and it was the only one where a Communist regime emerged victoriously. In all other countries which were affected by post-World War I civil wars, counterrevolutionaries defeated their foes and established either authoritarian (Italy, Hungary) or parliamentary (Finland, Germany) regimes.

Unlike these European civil wars, the Spanish revolutionary-counterrevolutionary confrontation was not the by-product of a world war and was dependent nearly exclusively on endogenous developments. The Spanish “revolution,” as Payne terms it, began in 1931. Unlike Weimar or the French Third Republic, its origins were not rooted in the counterrevolutionary crushing of the extreme left. On the contrary, the “Jacobin” leaders of the Second Republic, especially Manuel Azaña, had as their top priority “la exclusión permanente de los intereses católicos y conservadores de la participación en su Gobierno” (p. 23). Their Socialist allies went one step further by asserting that the advent of the Republic had demonstrated that Spain had become so modern and developed that a permanently weakened right could no longer stop the coming of socialism. The result of the alliance between the Azaña’s left republicans and the Socialists was a regime in Javier Tusell’s words, “una democracia poco democrática” (p. 23). According to Payne, the Republic restricted civil rights and censored newspapers more severely than had the parliamentary monarchy. At the same time, he admits the conditional loyalty of the right to the republican regime aroused legitimate suspicions: “Aunque la derecha moderada ... se ajustó a la ley, su último objetivo no era mantener una república democrática, sino convertirla en una especie de régimen distinto de tendencias conservadores y corporativistas” (p. 29). However, Payne attributes to the left more responsibility for the breakdown of democracy in 1930s Spain. He explicitly agrees with Pío Moa that “la insurrección de los socialistas [en 1934] fue la más organizada, la más elaborada y la mejor armada de todas las acciones de insurrección que tuvieron lugar en Europa occidental durante el periodo en entreguerras” (p. 32). In Payne’s eyes, it was also the least defensible since, unlike the Austrian Socialist revolt of 1934, it was not a reaction to the imposition of an authoritarian government.

Unlike Moa, Payne asserts that Asturias was not the beginning of the civil war, which was not inevitable after 1934. He argues that the only secure path for the survival of the Republic was to massively and severely repress the radical left as had the French Third Republic during the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Weimar Republic during the Spartacus Revolt of 1918-19. Even though the elections of February 1936 demonstrated only limited polarization of a supposedly hyper-politicized society, the Popular Front’s failure to maintain order and its anti-democratic actions—manipulation of elections and, of course, the assassination of Calvo Sotelo—contributed greatly to further polarization. The

assassins of the opposition leader were close to the Socialist leader, Indalecio Prieto, who protected them from any investigation. Like the Italian Fascists, the Spanish socialists “eran la principal fuente de violencia política en sus respectivos países” (p. 72). The Popular Front government failed to realize that democracies could only be governed from the center, and this blunder resulted in civil war.

Both sides miscalculated that the war would be short. Instead, it turned into a war of attrition between revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries, both of whom engaged in massive and murderous terror. Nationalists embarked upon campaigns of political cleansing; whereas Republicans adopted a more synthetic politico-religious variety: “A pesar de toda la retórica sobre el ‘exterminio’, principalmente en los libros publicados en España durante estos últimos diez años, el único sector social que fue señalado como objetivo de ‘exterminio’ desde todos los puntos de vista fue el clero” (p. 116). The revolutionaries’ massacres and numerous acts of iconoclasm showed their desire to replace the old religion with their new secular faith. In reaction, Catholicism became the most cohesive cultural force in the Nationalist zone and the Spanish conflict the greatest war of religion of the twentieth century. In contrast to its fascist counterparts in Germany and Italy, the Falange became ultra-Catholic. It is symptomatic that after the war, the Church regained privileges that it had possessed during the reign of Alfonso XIII.

Although Payne asserts that an often unimaginative Franco missed opportunities for a quicker victory, the Caudillo ultimately proved to be a competent logistician and strategist in a long civil war. His airlift of North African troops—executed with crucial German and Italian assistance—saved the failing Alzamiento. The combined aerial-infantry operations that the Generalísimo employed to conquer the north anticipated those of the Second World War. The commitment of his elite forces, who often held out against much greater numbers of their Republican enemy, immensely contributed to the Nationalist victory. On the other side, as in many revolutions—the English, French, Russian, and Chinese—the Republic attempted to create a “new model army” but eventually copied the old military structures. Although the Ejército Popular had a number of important defensive successes—the Battles of Madrid, Guadalajara, and Valencia—its lack of well-trained and dedicated low-ranking officers and its logistical difficulties weakened it decisively.

Unlike other contemporary European civil wars, the Spanish conflict also involved naval and aerial forces. Despite the high degree of politicization of revolutionary rank-and-file sailors who were able to dominate the fleet at the beginning of the war, the Republican navy proved to be incompetent; whereas the Nationalists used their own smaller naval forces more effectively. The air war

during the conflict prefigured—on a much reduced scale—that of World War II. Both sides responded to offensive aerial assaults with reprisals against urban populations, although the Nationalists considerably outdid the Republicans in numbers of civilians slaughtered. The Insurgents harvested a worldwide barrage of negative publicity, exemplified by Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*.

The most surprising aspect of the Spanish conflict may have been the Nationalist economic performance. The relatively efficient Nationalist economy outperformed not only that of its Republican enemy but also its counterrevolutionary (but quite corrupt) counterparts in White Russia and Nationalist China. In the Republican zone, the most profound worker revolution of the twentieth-century probably harmed the Loyalist cause more than it helped. Not only did production remain relatively stagnant in the Republican zone, but the revolutionary confiscation of private property also alienated the capitalist democracies from the Republic. Great Britain, France, and the United States were reluctant to aid what was perceived to be a disorderly and bloody, even if legal, regime. The fascist powers—Germany and Italy—were much bolder. Hitler successfully used the conflict to cement his alliance with Italy and to distract the democracies from German expansionist plans in central and eastern Europe. Mussolini regarded Spain as part of his Mediterranean sphere of influence and pushed the Nationalists to adopt his Fascist model.

Payne is especially expert on Soviet policy towards Spain. He interprets the Popular Fronts propagated by the Third International not as an indication of any real moderation of Communist goals but as a tactic which would more reliably lead to revolution. During the civil war, the Communist objective was to establish a new kind of republic that in many ways resembled the “popular democracies” which the Red Army would impose on eastern Europe following World War II. Thus, in contrast to the extreme left (and historians such as Hugh Thomas), Payne does not view Communist policy as counterrevolutionary but rather as oriented towards the construction of “un regimen autoritario de izquierdas” (p. 195) with a partially nationalized economy. Juan Negrín shared this vision, but the “semipluralista” Republic never became a Stalinist puppet state, even though Communists dominated the Ejército Popular. The Spanish conflict greatly enhanced the prestige of the USSR. Antifascism gave Communism a new life and provided it with prestigious artistic, intellectual, and scientific fellow travelers.<sup>1</sup> Some of the latter included espionage agents who

---

<sup>1</sup> This point is also made by François Furet, *Le passé d'une illusion: Essai sur l'idée communiste au XXe siècle*, (Paris, 1995).

would eventually offer information—usually of limited value—on the development of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup>

Payne considers the advent of the Second Republic as “revolutionary” and the Jacobin and exclusivist left more responsible for the regime’s failure than the corporatist and authoritarian right. In my opinion, he underestimates the right’s commitment to subvert the Republic. The author states that Alcalá Zamora constantly asked the CEDA to declare itself loyal to the Republic, but that the CEDA refused because “el ‘republicanismo’ en España era un indicativo de apoyo a un régimen sectario que negaba buena parte de sus derechos a los católicos” (p. 41). Although a number of measures restricting religious expression—secularizing Catholic cemeteries, forbidding street processions, and imposing lay education—may have been ill-timed and overly provocative, any regime which separates church from state will inevitably negate some Catholic privileges. If the left can be criticized for not supporting pro-Republican and moderate Catholics, such as Alcalá-Zamora, so can the right.

The loss of privileges or even rights should not be confused with the persecution of a Church which had created a global model of intolerance during its many centuries of religious monopoly. Its position in Spain in the early 1930s was certainly better than its counterpart in Mexico in the 1920s or even France in the 1910s. Even so, many of its publications viciously attacked the Republic.<sup>3</sup> Gil Robles, the CEDA leader who showed increasing sympathy for fascism after Hitler came to power in early 1933, understandably frightened the left.<sup>4</sup> So did the right’s indiscriminate crackdown on the left after October 1934. Unfortunately, both left and right believed that only repression could save the Republic or Spain, and both felt that tolerance of the enemy would lead to their own destruction. As Payne points out, only a dwindling number of conservative republicans and especially the Radical Party supported liberal democracy. The latter’s commonplace corruption proved to be preferable to the mass murders that each side executed at the war’s outbreak. Both the left and the right persecuted or killed those who obeyed the law and the constitution.

Although insufficiently critical of the right and the Church, Payne’s volume demonstrates the continuing vitality of research on the Second Republic

---

<sup>2</sup> See Andrew J. Rotter, *Hiroshima: The World’s Bomb*, (Oxford, 2008), pp. 238-244.

<sup>3</sup> Fernando del Rey, *Paisanos en lucha: Exclusión política y violencia en la Segunda República española*, (Madrid, 2008), pp. 170-173

<sup>4</sup> Gabriele Ranzato, *El eclipse de la democracia: La guerra civil española y sus orígenes, 1931-1939*, trans. Fernando Borrajo, (Madrid, 2006), pp. 168-191.

and Civil War. His synthesis is full of provocative and stimulating observations from a historian of great ability.

Michael Seidman  
University of North Carolina, Willmington