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Review of: Hugo García, *The Truth About Spain: Mobilizing British Public Opinion, 1936-39*

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Hugo García, *The Truth About Spain: Mobilizing British Public Opinion, 1936-39*. Brighton (UK) and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2010. 337pp.

Linda Falfreeman, *¡Salud! British volunteers in the Republican medical service during the Spanish civil war, 1936-1939*. Brighton (UK) and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2012. 372 pp.

Perhaps surprisingly, in view of the considerable amount already published on aspects of the Spanish civil war relating to Britain, both these publications succeed in offering new and interesting material. Both are based on comprehensive research and are well-referenced throughout, making them useful resources for the benefit of future students. However, each author has a distinctly different approach to their subject matter; Hugo Garcia offering a wealth of analysis and insight on the complex themes surrounding civil war propaganda and its effects, whereas Linda Palfreeman's study of the British volunteers in the Republican medical services keeps the primary focus firmly on the practical aspects of their work and the individuals themselves.

Garcia's book was originally published in Spanish as *Mentiras necesarias* (Necessary Lies), a title that gives a clearer indication of the content of the book than the English version. *The Truth about Spain!* would certainly have benefited from a question mark. As Nigel Townson, the series editor, points out in the preface, 'The aim of *The Truth about Spain* is not to establish the veracity or otherwise of the Spanish propaganda campaigns, but to reveal their inner workings and how these impinged upon their efforts to sway British public opinion.' In this, the author succeeds admirably, presenting a dispassionate and detailed study of the forms and functioning of those campaigns.

Garcia's book is divided into four sections. The first places the civil war within the context of the historical development of modern-style propaganda. The second describes the trajectories followed in the techniques of the opposing sides. Censorship, as 'the other side of propaganda', plays a key part here, as does the development of 'war tourism' recognised by some, but not all, as an important cog in the propaganda machine. García shows how policies and practice varied, being assessed overall as far less 'successful' in the Nationalist zone than in the areas held by the Republican government. Of course, 'success', is a term requiring definition and dissection. The expulsions of correspondents and heavy-handed treatment by Franco's Press Chief, Luis Bolín, clearly proved counter-productive in certain instances. In contrast, as García documents, the journalists who arrived in Valencia at the office of his

Republican counterpart, Constanca de la Mora, were subject to ‘a charm offensive’ that offset some of the more coercive aspects of Republican press censorship. This more positive approach established early in 1937 was sorely needed after the dire publicity for the Republic as a result of the violent breakdown of public order in the first months of the war.

García’s chapter ‘Triumphing over Chaos’ charts the extent to which the Republican government regained control of the propaganda agenda after these early calamities and, amongst other campaigns, was able to build on support among the general public in Britain. The presentation of the source material in this chapter is masterly, but just how does one evaluate the impact of, for example, radio broadcasts made from Spain by one of Franco’s foremost British female fans, Florence Farmborough, speaking in her peculiarly distinctive diction of the ‘purist patriotism’ of the Nationalist cause, as opposed to the heartfelt pleas for medical aid for the Republican wounded made by British volunteer nurses (not mentioned by García), transmitted from beleaguered Madrid.

Before attempting to address more fully such issues of evaluation, García presents us with a meaty third section, ‘Disentangling the Truth’; four chapters each with a focus on different core themes. While remaining non-judgemental in his approach, García reviews how the war was defined from the perspective of the legally elected Republican government as a fight against fascism, feudalism and foreign invasion, whilst from the point of view of the insurgents, their rebellion was a ‘legitimate defence’ against a godless Marxist revolution.

The subtle analysis of the intensifying propaganda war then moves on to ‘The Battle of Atrocities’, a grim appraisal of the way in which the stark facts of shocking events were at times subject to embellishment or misrepresentation. Indeed, plain lies played a considerable part, not only in the exaggeration of numbers, but also as in the infamous case of the Nationalists denying responsibility for the bombing of Guernica. García shows how the Republicans concentrated on producing positive, rather than negative, propaganda. Meanwhile, Franco demonstrated his clear agenda when it came to atrocities and their use as an instrument with which to wage war. Since the publication of this book, considerably more has been added to the public record of such horrors and their subsequent effects by Paul Preston in his meticulous and long-needed study, *The Spanish Holocaust*, and by Helen Graham in her perceptive and thought provoking *The War and its Shadow*. Graham assesses the Nationalist violence as a way of ‘killing change’. The intent was ‘to teach those who had believed in the Republic as a vehicle of change that their aspirations would always be bought at too high a price.’ Or, as Paul Preston has so succinctly called it, ‘bankable terror’.

The chapter on 'The Battles of Civilization: Religion, Art and Culture' opens with a close examination of propaganda relating to the Catholic Church. The Republicans had attempted to explain the murder of six thousand priests in the early days of the war as the result of the long-standing repressive nature of the Church in Spain and its active and militant support of the insurgents. Even so, inevitably, Catholics in Britain who supported the Republic were put to the test. A few were not deterred. Monica Whately, referred to by García as a Marxist and one of those who 'dared defy the discipline of their Church', was particularly outspoken. Exploring Whately's role in more depth shows that her membership of the feminist 'Six Point Group' and consequent awareness of the implications of Franco's *Movimiento* for women were also key factors motivating her support for the Republic. After visiting Spain as a member of a Church delegation, Whately addressed British Catholics through the pages of the *Daily Worker*, stating that she had no alternative as the Catholic Press would not publish her article. Under the title of 'Let Catholics Know the Truth', she advanced her view that the Republic was anti-clerical, rather than anti-Christian. García reviews the evidence for this belief. The execution of sixteen members of the Basque clergy in the Nationalist zone added fuel to the fires of a volatile and on-going propaganda battle to have either God or religious tolerance on your side. Meanwhile, in the defence of art and culture the Republicans were soon way ahead in putting their case to the British public and gaining the outspoken support of artists and intellectuals. The fascinating pages devoted to art and culture leave the reader disappointed that more was not included on the subject. Similarly, in the chapter on 'The Battle over Foreign Intervention', expansion of the short analysis of the role of the International Brigades would have been welcomed, though the author may have decided that adequate coverage has been given elsewhere already.

The final section, 'The Outcome of the Battle', reviews the effects of the propaganda campaigns on the British population, though little mention is made of the widespread and significant fund-raising campaigns on behalf of the Basque refugee children or for the Republican medical services. Although García cites Tom Buchanan's view that in Britain there was no Aid Spain 'Movement' with a capital 'M', functioning on a national level with a shared political agenda, the widespread network of campaigns did constitute a 'movement' in the broader sense of the word, allowing people of varied political backgrounds, especially women, to mobilise the British public in support of the Republic in many different ways.

García's well-argued conclusions are depressing. He writes, 'the words and images of those years have set the agenda for historical debate ever since the war's end, and the arguments constructed at that time have been revived and re-elaborated countless times.' Recent evidence of this can be seen in the 'Obituary Wars', fought out in the Spanish press as the families of the victims

of atrocities still struggle to come to terms with the denial of their right to mourn their dead (see Ignacio Fernández de Mata, 'So That We May Rest in Peace: Death Notices and Ongoing Bereavement', *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 12:4, pp. 439-462). Despite the fact that the Republicans knew the strength of appealing to the British traditional support for the underdog, and that their propaganda compares well against the 'ideologically antiquated, aesthetically mediocre' Nationalist offerings, their defeat was almost inevitable; their fate sealed by powerful vested interests in Britain who supported the charade played out in the name of non-intervention. We are left, gloomily in agreement with Kate Mangan who wrote soon after she left Spain, 'Issues of war, peace and commerce are manipulated by very few people without regard for public opinion and very little for governments... Decisions are made, then a publicity campaign [is launched] to reconcile the public to them' (p. 229).

But this is not the only side to human nature. For a more uplifting and positive viewpoint, one has to look no further than the work of the British volunteers in the medical services, described so movingly in *¡Salud!*. Linda Palfreeman's largely chronological chapters build in a clear and concise way on the research done many years ago by the American nurse who had served in Spain, Fredericka Martin, who died before she could publish her findings, and by Jim Fyrth for his classic 1986 publication, *The Signal was Spain: The Aid Spain Movement in Britain 1936-39*. To these sources Palfreeman has added more recently available archival material and a wealth of oral and written testimonies.

Palfreeman first explores the social and political background leading up to the formation of the first medical teams from Britain and recounts the experiences of the volunteers after their arrival in Spain. She grapples with the problems they faced, discussing the tensions between them as well as the many challenges they overcame to care for the wounded. The majority of the British personnel were soon incorporated into the medical services of the International Brigades as part of the Republican army. The organisation of the services and the work they carried out in key battles is followed in detail, but *¡Salud!* is not primarily a study of the practice of medicine in the civil war, already well-covered in Nicholas Coni's book, *Medicine and Warfare: Spain, 1936-1939*. However, Palfreeman describes many related aspects, such as the system of triage in which surgical interventions and treatment were carried out as quickly as possible for urgent cases, forerunner of the later M.A.S.H. units. During the war in Spain, provisional hospitals were set up closer to the front lines than ever before, sometimes in haste during terrifying retreats, and in a wide variety of less than adequate locations including disused railway tunnels and caves. In one chapter, biographical portraits of four individuals (two doctors, a medical student and an ambulance driver/mechanic) give a more personal perspective on the work being done. Nurses feature in an appendix

giving basic details of their lives, though information is often sadly limited by the lack of available information. Re-constructing the life stories of women who were not well-known in the public sphere, like the majority of these nurses, is a difficult and at times, impossible task, although it can be done in some cases (see Angela Jackson, *'For us it was Heaven': The Passion, Grief and Fortitude of Patience Darton from the Spanish Civil War to Mao's China*). Palfreeman gives due recognition to the part played by British volunteers in the development of new medical techniques and improvements in the blood transfusion services. As a result, many lives were saved despite the frequently horrific conditions, not only due to bombardments and extremes of weather, but also thanks to frequent shortages of everything imaginable, except perhaps, flies, lice and rats.

Palfreeman hoped to produce a book that would do justice to the work of the medical volunteers who were attempting to salvage something of life amongst the mayhem of war. She has succeeded in doing so, and has produce an account that is valuable not only for students of the history of medical services in wartime, but also as a record of man's humanity to man under inhuman conditions.

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