

Twentieth-Century Spain: Politics and Society in Spain, 1898-1998

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This volume - the latest addition to Jeremy Black's edited series *European History in Perspective* - is a laudable attempt by Francisco Romero to produce a synthetic account of Spain's tortuous twentieth-century history for an undergraduate readership. The complexity of the subject matter is quite apparent, as is the difficulty involved in rendering Spanish history accessible to English-speaking undergraduates more familiar with the gentler story of constitutional developments in Britain or the United States. Spain, for so long dismissed as 'different', is often unfamiliar to students, except as a holiday destination. The longevity of the Franco regime did, of course, mark Spain out from Atlantic Europe and, while there are striking parallels with the twentieth-century development of Portugal and Greece, these histories too are seldom part of the undergraduate repertoire and receive scant attention even in research circles.

The very recent history of Spain, however, belies any sustained comparison with its smaller and poorer southern European neighbours. While all three countries are now in the European Union, only Spain is a major player. Since the 1980s Spain has completed a profound economic and social transformation to complement the political transition to democracy begun in the aftermath of General Franco's death in 1975. The remarkable success of this process - which can lead commentators to underplay how fragile and uncertain its early stages were - is a starting point for all contemporary histories of Spain. How could a country which had torn itself apart in the 1930s and subsequently suffered the obscurity and obscurantism of the Franco years have emerged in such a short space of time to take its rightful place on the European stage? Explanatory analyses of this process are many and various. Some see capitalist development as the essential prerequisite and even the cause of democratic pluralism and so date the beginnings of Spain's transformation to the 'opening-up' of the economy under Franco's technocratic ministers in the 1960s. Very recently, newspaper commentators have claimed that only with the election of a centre-right government with an absolute majority on 12 March 2000 can the transition finally be said to be over.

Couched in these - its most familiar - terms, the story of twentieth-century Spain is one of modernisation. Following Raymond Carr's magisterial *Modern Spain, 1875-1975* (Oxford, 1980), the corresponding

political story is usually seen as the failure of liberalism. The lack of a liberal hegemony or even a broad consensus among Spain's political elites and the corresponding failure to reform or invigorate central government and the apparatus of the state led to the convulsive crises of the early twentieth century which culminated in civil war. As the author of a monograph on Spain between 1914 and 1918, Dr Romero is an expert in the crisis of liberal Spain and it is here where he begins his story.

The book's starting point is the deep and abiding trauma of 1898, of military defeat by the United States and the consequent loss of the remnants of Spain's colonial empire. In an age when international status was measured by colonial possessions this was, as Romero makes plain, a mutilating blow, made worse by America's parvenu status. Immediately, the weaknesses inherent in the system under which Spain had been governed since the restoration of the monarchy in 1875 - and which are outlined in the introduction - were made plain. This governmental system, dominated by landed elites, was reliant for the production of parliamentary majorities on clientelism and patronage, and dedicated to the exclusion of other interest groups or political creeds. Already threatened by internal migration, urbanisation and the development of mass politics, the Restoration system found itself under systematic attack from Catalan and Basque Nationalists as well as Republicans and so more vulnerable to assault from the organised working class movements of socialists and, after 1910, anarcho-syndicalists.

Current historiography in Spanish is much concerned with these questions, particularly those to do with central and peripheral nationalisms. Indeed, production of essays and scholarly monographs on 'the nation' threatens to approach industrial proportions. Although such eminent historians as Juan Pablo Fusi, José Alvarez Junco and Borja de Riquer i Permaner play key roles in the concomitant historiographical debates their work finds little echo here. Dr Romero's focus is throughout on political actors and the deeds and events which make up a conventional high political narrative. Structural or causal explanations go largely unexplored. Yet, a prime concern of current research on nationalism is the failure of the Spanish state to promulgate a centralising nationalism in the nineteenth century. Unlike France, for example, there was no proselytising of agreed or invented national symbols - even the flag and the anthem arrived late.

In part, this failure derived from a lack of consensus as to the national identity and the nation's past - a theme illuminated in recent work by Carolyn Boyd. The increasingly vociferous Catholic identity of the Spanish right also ensured that, for the 'men of order', national symbols and identities were simply religious - the cross as Spain's standard, the 'Reconquest' as her historical past. For the more secular-minded, both within the Liberal parties of the Restoration system and, particularly, the Republican parties excluded from it, such an identity was simply impossible. Yet, at least until the abortive Second Republic (1931-6), successive regimes failed to find the economic resources and political will to implement a national education programme on the French model which could have provided Spanish children with the foundations of a common language and culture.

The loss of the colonies after 1898 clearly meant that an imperialising popular nationalism on the British model was impossible for Spain. Rather the trauma of 1898 saw different sections of the political nation retrench within established positions. Hostility towards a governmental system increasingly seen as biased to the centre meant that conservative Catalan nationalism moved from a vision of 'a great Catalunya in a great Spain' to an idea of the nation defined against Castile. These tensions inherent in the Spanish system were played out in the years during and after World War I. Spain's neutrality in this conflict did, perhaps, mark the country out from other countries in western Europe. Spain's historical development has not been so different from its European neighbours, but the neutrality of such a large and once great power did mean that, not least in cultural terms, Spain in the wake of 1918 was 'different'.

Yet, as Dr Romero puts it, 'Spain did not enter the war but the war entered Spain' (p. 30) effectively destroying any possibility of maintaining the already crumbling pre-war consensus. Italy and Portugal had the same experience, but as the result of the trauma and exhaustion of fighting. Neutral Spain, Romero suggests, experienced not only ideological polarisation over the outcome of the war but also profound economic and social changes that rendered obsolete the old ways of governing. As Spain experienced - though not of course for the last time - an unfamiliar economic cycle of boom-bust, the working class

gathered strength, now in the towns as well as the countryside. News of the Russian revolution swept through Europe, and so the Spanish social elites came to see political problems increasingly in terms of public order. While anarchist sections of the working class had long advocated violence, only between 1917 and 1923 did Spain truly experience a revolutionary situation. Yet, in prophetic fashion, the moribund institutions of the Restoration monarchy were endangered only during the brief period of military discontent in 1917.

The temporary solution to the crisis of the Restoration system was a military coup. The Primo de Rivera dictatorship of 1923 to 1930 is the subject of a chapter which devotes eight pages to the regime and fourteen to its disintegration. Yet, as Dr Romero briefly points out (pp. 52-3), the Primo years were a period of modernisation in Spanish politics, particularly at local level. The 'old men' of the Restoration, irrevocably tainted by the charge of *caciquismo*, were moved aside by a new generation of professional Catholic men who would become the backbone of the parliamentary right under the Republic. This process may be seen as one of social and political modernisation, albeit incomplete. Primo's failure to consolidate his regime left it vulnerable, as was glaringly apparent after the crash of 1929. The brevity of the regime in part explains the structure of the chapter, but this also reflects the tempo of a book in which the remorseless march of events seems to dictate the structure. Events, actions and the speed of governmental change are explored in some detail leaving little room for analysis outside the political narrative.

The 'perspective' promised by the title of the series in which this volume is published is provided not by comparisons with the internal development of other European countries nor by any systematic application of the metanarratives associated with European modernisation but by an attention to international history and Spain's situation on the diplomatic stage. The author returns to the international arena at various intervals: most notably, perhaps at the start of the chapters on the civil war and the Franco regime, but the foreign policy pursued between 1914 and 1918 also receives some attention. The roots of the Second Republic, *la niña bonita*, on the other hand are seen as entirely Spanish. The Republic was 'the culmination of a process of mass mobilisation and opposition to the old politics of notables' which had been 'halted but not crushed in 1917' (p. 69). This account of the politics of the Republic focuses on the rapid polarisation of politics after 1931 and the concomitant failure - at least before July 1936 - to construct a sufficiently broad consensus around the Republican project of reform.

This narrowing of the Republic's political base between 1931 and 1936, the mobilisation of an efficient parliamentary right which was never reconciled to the regime, and the alienation of sectors on the left may be seen as the new regime's failure to construct the 'Republican nation'. Yet the Republic was a reforming regime with an explicit and self-conscious view of what modernising Spain should entail. A secular state operating according to the rule of law with an admittedly ill-defined sense of social justice would open the way for an educated body of citizens to enjoy 'European' prosperity and freedom. The desire to 'Europeanise' Spain had been apparent among Republicans since 1898 and now, it seemed, the opportunity had arisen. Of course, some of those who supported the Republic, most apparently in the socialist and anarcho-sindicalist unions, had a different and often more ill-defined view of its goals. But, while the Second Republic may have been undermined by the left, it was destroyed by the right.

Romero also suggests that the Republic was the precursor to 'the last and fiercest battle in a European civil war which had been underway since the Bolshevik triumph of 1917' (p. 94). Though this thesis clearly does provide an over-arching interpretation which ranges more widely than Spain, it goes unelaborated and is supported by the most fleeting of references. The author moves immediately to foreign responses to the military uprising of 18 July 1936 - conceived as a swift coup d'état and, in these terms, an utter failure - outlining the international situation (pp. 94-105) and arguing that this determined the war's eventual outcome. The scale of aid from the Axis powers, particularly Italy, and the effect of British non-intervention, so appositely called 'malevolent neutrality' by Enrique Moradiellos, loaded the dice against the Republic. While the discussion of Nationalist Spain is focused very heavily on Franco himself, Romero offers an exemplary account of Republican resistance to his assault. In an admirably concise and lucid fourteen pages (pp. 112-25), the author not only succeeds in making accessible the often bewildering complexities of left-wing affiliations and politics during the war but also in synthesising the most recent and plausible research

on the role played by the communist party. In this way, Romero's analysis of the war far outstrips that offered by George Esenwein a recent textbook on the Republic and War in Spain.

While undergraduates will have good reason to be grateful to Dr Romero for this chapter on the civil war (particularly its final section), the ensuing discussion of 'Franco, Regent for Life' may disappoint. As the title of the chapter suggests, the focus once again becomes personal and, as the endnotes show, the analytical debt to Preston's definitive biography is very apparent. However, it is not so much the obsession with the personal role of the dictator which is the problem. After all, it was essentially a personal rule. But the author once again moves his attention to the international arena, beginning his discussion of the dictatorship with 'the myth of neutrality' in World War II and paying a marked attention to foreign policy throughout. This means that not only is the balance of the discussion skewed - over three pages on the Hendaye meeting with Hitler must, for instance, be excessive - but also that there is never any space for a concerted discussion of the regime itself, of its social base, political presence, and longevity.

Treating a regime that lasted for over forty years in a single chapter inevitably makes for a cursory discussion. But when twelve pages are taken to get the reader to 1945 and, later, a further ten pages devoted to the regime's disintegration, there can be almost no sustained analytical discussion of just what the regime was or why it survived for so long. Part of the answer, of course, lies in its repressive nature and the brutal nature of the Francoist repression is mentioned. But there is no attempt to discern the nature or extent of support for the dictatorship nor why many Spaniards acquiesced in it for so long. In this reviewer's opinion this analysis is not simply the result of authorial choices as to the structure of his book. Rather, bifurcating discussions of international history and political narratives leaves the reader falling back on contingency as the only apparent explanation for historical change. Franco was lucky not to become further embroiled in the Axis war effort and that may help to explain why Spain survived into the post-war but it does not and cannot explain why the dictator died in his bed at the age of eighty-two having ruled the country for thirty-six years.

After Franco's death, the Spanish political system was democratised from within - a remarkable and idiosyncratic process known to all as *la transición*. The account given here joins many already published in English, though Dr Romero rightly eschews any suggestion of inevitability and underlines the uncertainty of the eventual outcome. It was, as he puts it, 'walking on a tightrope'. The roots of the transition are seen in the 'more complex and plural civil society' (p. 161) emerging in Spain before Franco's death. Spain's rapid emergence as a democratic, European and Atlantic power was undoubtedly helped by the international context of the 1970s which, in such contrast to the 1930s, aided and abetted democracy in all its forms. The functioning of Spanish democracy after 1982 - which saw the first socialist government elected since 1931 - is the subject of the book's final pages.

In commenting on the very recent and the unfinished, a different note creeps into the historian's voice. The tone here is both conjectural and speculative and even, on occasion, moralising. No historian is comfortable with the very recent past and we are not necessarily qualified to evaluate it in the way that we do more remote periods. The verdict passed here on Felipe González, for example, is harsh. Romero suggests that he will not go down in history as the great moderniser of Spanish politics as he left office so tainted by corruption scandals. There may be a suggestion here of the personal disappointment felt by many at the wave of scandals which swept over the PSOE in the 1990s. Yet, this piece was, presumably, written before similar scandals broke over the German Christian Democrats - scandals which, as in Spain and elsewhere, invariably concern party financing. They are not, in any respect, similar to the 'widespread political corruption . of the notables in the first decades of the century' - a claim Romero wisely abandons in the subsequent sentence (p. 184).

Even in the 1980s, Spain's fledgling democracy was remarkably stable, characterised by a high degree of political and popular consensus to the centre-left of the spectrum. Both the apparatus of the state and the political system were finally and thoroughly overhauled. The military ceased to be a threat, the bureaucracy was reformed. Indeed, in the 1990s, the problems afflicting Spanish democracy were those seen all over Europe. Apathy and corruption scandals currently appear to define political life in the west, not just in the south.

Romero concludes on a different note, looking to the future of a Spain governed by the right-wing Partido Popular (PP) under José María Aznar in partnership with Catalan and Basque nationalists. This, he believes, could have been an opportunity for the centre to recognise the peripheral nations and so finally lay to rest 'the last remaining ghosts of the civil war' (p. 185). Yet, while Spain's political nation continues to experience problems which undoubtedly have historical roots they are not the convulsive and devious fractures of earlier in the century. Spain is now a modern state with a legally defined if contested vision of the nation. Romero cites as an anecdote the behaviour of some PP supporters who, on the night of their first election victory in 1996, taunted the Catalan president with the phrase 'Pujol, enano, que hables castellano' [Pujol, you dwarf, speak Castilian]. On the night of 12 March 2000 they chanted the same thing. Neither Pujol nor Aznar is likely to take any notice.

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