

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Ashes and Granite. Destruction and Reconstruction in the Spanish Civil War and its Aftermath

Review Number:

1250

Publish date:

Thursday, 10 May, 2012

Author:

Olivia Muñoz-Rojas

ISBN:

9781845194369

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£65.00

Pages:

272pp.

Publisher:

Sussex Academic Press

Publisher url:

Place of Publication:

Eastbourne

Reviewer:

Dacia Viejo-Rose

At least three factors go towards explaining why the destruction of Spanish cities during the Civil War (1936-9) and the subsequent reconstruction efforts have long been overlooked and under-studied. First, the monstrous scale of destruction wrought by the Second World War on European cities pulled horrified gazes away from Spain and made the violence suffered there seem to shrink to insignificant proportions by comparison. Second, the post-war period in Spain was marked by varying degrees of isolationism during which the country was alternately ignored, kept out of the Marshall plan, or used as a convenient ally (i.e. location for US military bases) in a progressively tense Cold War. Finally, the forceful and influential rhetoric of the Franco regime reiterated, through state-controlled media and propaganda campaigns, the achievements of reconstruction while ignoring the stark realities faced by Spaniards trying to survive among the ruins of lives, cities, and communities.

Another possible explanation for the lack of substantial research on the destruction and reconstruction of Spain during the war and ensuing dictatorship is hinted at in the author's preface. Here she indicates that courses towards her degree in politics from Madrid's Complutense University included those in 'Spanish political history [that] ended with the Spanish Civil War in 1939, and in Spanish contemporary politics [that]

began in 1975? (p. xxiv). The presence of this absence, the 36-year blip so conveniently ignored, had led her to conclude that little of interest or importance must have happened during that period. In *Ashes and Granite*, Dr Muñoz-Rojas plunges into the underwritten period, piecing together the narratives of three case studies of cities and their destruction and reconstruction experiences. By so doing, Olivia Muñoz-Rojas makes an important contribution to reversing this situation by participating in an effort led largely by Paul Preston, most recently in his publication *The Spanish Holocaust* (1), to pay due attention to the Spanish conflict and its aftermath. A detailed examination of this era is of the utmost significance not only because of the extreme levels of violence and destruction but also because of the long-term impact of this period in Spanish history, the consequences of which continue to hang over Spain like that deadly swinging pendulum in Edgar Allan Poe's story.

As indicated by the author, several parts of the book were previously published in journals, and as chapters in edited volumes. Here these texts have been elaborated upon, and new ones added. Originally trained as a political scientist, Dr Muñoz-Rojas now brings together interests in areas that include sociology, urban studies, and architecture. This interdisciplinarity is in evidence in *Ashes and Granite* as the author explores the stories of construction, destruction, and reconstruction of specific structures in: Madrid, Bilbao, and Barcelona. The case studies are very well illustrated with over 70 black and white images including photographs, maps, and reconstruction plans drawn from various municipal archives and a wide range of contemporary newspapers and publications. Thanks to the author's work in finding and including these images, the reader is able to see the effects of the war on existing structures as well as those of the subsequent reconstruction.

Two recent volumes edited by Casar Pinazo and Esteban Chaparría, and Colorado Castellary, dedicated to cultural heritage in Spain during the war and post-war, include case studies on the reconstruction of architecture in Aragón, Cataluña and Valencia, as well as more general assessments of the process as a whole.(2) Dr Muñoz-Rojas' case studies both complement and contrast with these. She wisely selected to explore the capitals of three important regions that had different experiences of the war and post-war: Castile, the Basque Country and Catalonia respectively. And, her decision to focus on different types of structures in each city – a building in Madrid, bridges in Bilbao, and an old Cathedral neighbourhood in Barcelona – adds a further dimension of texture to the case studies and her to analysis.

A constant issue in the Franco reconstruction is the vast chasm between rhetoric and reality. It is a gap that comes into evidence in all three of the case studies addressed in this book. In the first case, that of Madrid's military barracks known as the *Cuartel de la Montaña*, the grandiose plans for a Falangist stronghold never materialised. What we see here is how a particular building became a symbolic site as a result of having been the scene of a significant set of events during the war. The ruins of the building, thus imbued with meaning, became a focus of attention during the first stages of post-war reconstruction planning. What is fascinating about the story of this site is the ways in which it illustrates how the balance of power within the regime came to determine what symbolic sites eventually made it from the drawing board into reality. As Dr Muñoz-Rojas writes: 'In the end, the Franco regime was as successful in abandoning the Falange's dreams of grandiose, imperial post-war Madrid as it was of burying the uncomfortable memory of the Falangists' early defeat' (p. 79).

The second case study, that of Bilbao's bridges, is especially important as it presents an instance in which the destruction in question was carried out by the retreating Basque-Republican forces. This fact was rhetorically exploited by the regime which fabricated false accusations of similar acts being the cause of the destruction in other Basque towns, notably Gernika. Together with this manipulation of events, what stands out in the reconstruction of Bilbao's bridges are the contradictions between propagandistic rhetoric about rupture and renewal and reality, in which a degree of continuity was maintained. Here, the official discourse focused on discrediting the previous regime and highlighting differences from it, while in practice it maintained the construction contracts, with the original constructors, which had been in place before the war.

The case study of Barcelona illustrates the selective nature of Franco's reconstruction; here Dr Muñoz-Rojas shows how the Roman military belt was given preference over the Cathedral neighbourhood, *Barri de la Catedral*

, a part of the old city that has its origins in the Middle Ages. In other instances throughout Spain we see Gothic architecture and the austere styles of the Middle Ages given preference over later styles ? as in the Baroque choirs removed from church interiors during the Franco period in order to return them to their ?original? forms and ?authentic? atmospheres.(3) In Barcelona, we also see how the destruction was used as a pretext to put into effect plans already drawn up before the war to modernize and open up the old city centre. These two dynamics: the construction of a new vision of Spain by carefully selecting what heritage sites to conserve, or not; and the taking advantage of war-time destruction to put into place a programme of urban regeneration and urbanization, are present throughout Spain?s reconstruction, as well as other European post-war reconstruction experiences.(4)

Muñoz-Rojas takes the city as the focal point, and what emerges clearly from her case studies is the story of an attempt to materialize an imposed authority; a process identified by Richard Sennett: ?The work of authority has a goal: to convert power into images of strength. In doing this work, people often search for images that are clear and simple?.(5) What is less clear is the author?s analysis of whether this attempt was more or less successful in the post-war reconstruction of Spain.

The author has evidently been influenced by the work of Richard Sennett. A reflection of his work on order and disorder in the city (6), and on authority (7) might have allowed for a further level of analysis of the dynamics at play in Franco-period attempts to reshape Spanish cities. Similarly, a consideration of the scholarly research on memory and the city (8) could have permitted the author to reflect on how the dimension of memory, so important in contemporary Spain, relates (or not) to the cities presented in this volume. It would have been welcome to see the discussion opened out in the final chapter to include a reflection of how the theories and observations of critics such as Sennett, Sudjic, and, Foucault, for instance, compare with and could be applied to the Spanish experience. Deyan Sudjic in particular has explored how ?the architecture of the state? has been used in contemporary conflicts ? notably by the Republics of the former Yugoslavia in the run up to the wars of the 1990s and subsequently. In his *Edifice Complex* (9), Sudjic dedicates a chapter to ?landscapes of power? in which he discusses how both democratic and totalitarian leaders have used architecture strategically in order to make a public statement about their ability to control events and show how through the sheer power of will they are able to give shape to the world.(10) ?State architecture?, he writes ?is successful when it is able rapidly to take on the quality of inevitability?.(11) Was this the case in Spain? It would appear that yes, there are many examples that indicate to some extent it was successful in Spain: that the imposition of Escorial-style architecture, the hierarchical structuring of town centres, the differentiation of building materials used for ?noble? buildings or for those intended to house the working classes did acquire a quality of inevitability. Similarly, it would have been interesting to have included a reflection on Foucault?s understanding of power and space (12), for despite the rhetoric of unity Spain?s reconstruction shows what Foucault termed ?dividing practices?.(13)

At the centre of this book is a reflection on urbanism and politics; how urban planning and development are taken on in a post-war scenario. The author dedicates enough time to discussing the *construction* of the various sites studied that the subtitle of the book would have been equally accurate had it included this term. Some of the most intriguing points made by Dr Muñoz-Rojas are her remarks suggesting how the Spanish experience relates to other European ones. For instance, her mention of how the financial models developed for the Spanish reconstruction were informed by the post-First World War systems adopted by Italy (p. 27) is very suggestive, as are the brief glimpses offered at a comparison with post-Second World War reconstruction in Europe. Developing this comparative approach further in the final section of the book would have allowed for a broader understanding of how this Spanish experience fits within a wider picture, a scope which then would also have enabled the author to reflect on which of the dynamics that she observed were particular to Spain; perhaps this could be a subject for a future book or article.

Ashes and Granite clearly reveals the contradictory dynamics often present in post-war reconstructions and especially that of trying to draw on tradition while at the same time taking advantage of destruction to modernise. It also makes apparent a major gap that often arises between ambitious plans for reconstruction and the realities of post-war situations in which resources are limited, power balances delicate, and urgent

demands numerous. Dr Muñoz-Rojas has pulled together a variety of primary resources from a wide range of municipal archives to delineate a compelling image of the post-war reconstruction of Spanish cities. She shows how the Franco regime's vision of the 'new' Spain, and its corresponding reconstruction practices, evolved in direct response to its shifting allegiances with other countries. And, through the empirical material of the three cases studied, she demonstrates how crucial the symbolic dimension was to post-war reconstruction policies: alternating between layering symbolism, accentuating selective meanings, revealing old content, or imposing new interpretations. With *Ashes and Granite* Dr Muñoz-Rojas offers an important contribution to writing the story of this period in Spain's troubled past.

Notes

1. Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (London, 2012).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Bajo el Signo de la Victoria. La Conservación del Patrimonio Durante el Primer Franquismo (1936-1958)*, ed. José Ignacio Casar Pinazo and Julián Esteban Chapapría (Valencia, 2008); *Patrimonio, Guerra Civil y Posguerra*, ed. Arturo Colorado Castellary (Madrid, 2010).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Bajo el Signo de la Victoria*, ed. Pinazo and Chapapría.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Dacia Viejo-Rose, *Reconstructing Spain: Cultural heritage and memory after Civil War* (Eastbourne, 2011).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Richard Sennett, *Authority* (London, 1988), p. 165.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder. Personal Identity and City Life* (London, 1970).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Sennett, *Authority*.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. *Memory Culture and the Contemporary City*, ed. Staiger, Uta, Henriette Steiner and Andrew Webber (Basingstoke, 2009).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Devan Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex*. (London, 2011 (1st ed. 2005)).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-88.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-88.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Michel Foucault, 'Space, knowledge, and power?', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, NY, 1982), pp. 239-56.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Michel Foucault, 'The subject and power?', *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (Summer 1982).[Back to \(13\)](#)

Other reviews:

Michigan War Studies Review

<http://www.miwsr.com/2012-016.aspx> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1250>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/16377>

[2] <http://www.miwsr.com/2012-016.aspx>