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978-0-521-45932-7 - The Spanish Republic at War 1936–1939

Helen Graham

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THE SPANISH REPUBLIC AT WAR 1936–1939

‘... by some distance the best book I have read in any language on the Spanish Republic during the Civil War. The detailed – and thoroughly analytical – narrative of the politics of the Republic outshines anything that has been written before ... A very major work by a mature historian writing at the height of her powers.’

Professor Paul Preston, London School of Economics and
Political Science

This is a new and comprehensive analysis of the forces of the Spanish left – interpreted broadly – during the civil war of 1936–9, and the first of its kind for more than thirty years.

The book argues two crucial propositions. First, that the wartime responses (and limitations) of the Spanish left – republicans, socialists, communists and anarcho-syndicalists – can be understood only in relation to their pre-war experiences, world views, organisational structures and the wider Spanish context of acute uneven development which had moulded their organisations over previous decades. Second, that the overarching influence that shaped the evolution of the Republic between 1936 and 1939 was the war itself: the book explores the complex, cumulative effects of a civil war fought under the brutally destabilising conditions of an international arms embargo.

HELEN GRAHAM is Reader in Spanish History, Royal Holloway, University of London. Her book *Socialism and War: The Spanish Socialist Party in Power and Crisis, 1936–1939* was published by Cambridge University Press in 1991, and she has otherwise published widely on the political, social and cultural history of Spain in the 1930s and 1940s.

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For Herbert Rutledge Southworth,
in memoriam 1908–1999

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París, julio, tengo frío, mamá, tengo frío. Estaba llorando Rosell por Bonet, por Oviedo, por el frágil esqueleto del pajarillo de la Libertad, por sí mismo, y en la oscuridad crecía una bestia cúbica de mandíbula poderosa y labios despectivos sobre un fondo de marchas militares y gritos de rigor, rugidos invertebrados que expulsaban la música y la palabra.

Paris, July, I'm cold, Mamma, I'm so cold. Rosell was weeping for all of them, for Bonet, for Oviedo, for the fragile frame of the tiny bird that was Freedom, for himself, and out of the darkness there grew a monstrous massive-jawed, sneering beast, against a background of military marches and the obligatory shouting, incoherent roars drowning out music and words.

Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, *El pianista* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1985), pp. 270–1

You who will emerge from the flood
In which we have gone under
Remember
When you speak of our failings
The dark time too
Which you have escaped
Bertolt Brecht, 'To those born later'

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Preface

This book is concerned with the Second Spanish Republic during the civil war of 1936–9 and the reasons for its defeat. Its central arguments can be encapsulated in two crucial propositions. The first is that the wartime responses (and limitations) of the Spanish left – republicans, socialists, communists and anarcho-syndicalists – can only be understood in relation to their pre-war experiences, worldviews, organisational structures and the wider Spanish national context of acute uneven development which had moulded their organisations over previous decades. The second is that the overarching influence that shaped the evolution of the Republic between 1936 and 1939 was *the war itself*.

It is remarkable the extent to which existing analyses have in practice relegated the war to background noise or narrative filler between chunks of political analysis that nevertheless remain largely dissociated from it. But the war had a complex and cumulative impact on every aspect of Republican polity and society. If we are to understand what happened and why, then we have to recreate its texture. More particularly because this was a civil war, and one fought under the devastating conditions of Non-Intervention imposed by Britain and France. This meant virtually total international isolation and a *de facto* economic embargo that placed the Republic – and only the Republic – at an enormous material disadvantage throughout.

Coverage of Non-Intervention to date has concentrated on its international diplomatic aspects and mainly on the first year of the war. But what destroyed the Republic was the long-term impact of Non-Intervention over nearly three gruelling years. It brought the daily erosion not only of the Republic's military capacity, but of its political legitimacy as well. For economic embargo prevented the Republic from sustaining the social and economic fabric of the home front and, in the end, from meeting even the minimal requirements of its population in terms of food and shelter. Vast too was the psychological cost of war under such conditions.

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The international political diplomacy that produced and sustained Non-Intervention also repeatedly blocked all the Republic's political exits, making it impossible for it to negotiate an end to the conflict in 1938. In the last agonising months international mediation was still withheld, even though it was the only course that might have reduced the risk of massive violent reprisal against the defeated. In the end the Spanish Republic collapsed inwards under the huge, intolerable pressures born of the war. A war that others had forced the Republic to fight would end by consuming it utterly.

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