

Introduction

‘In all their affairs, nothing is ever quite what it seems. We grope in a sort of fog when we try to understand them.’ The quote comes from *The Spanish Labyrinth*, the book that Gerald Brenan began writing in Great Britain while Spain was steeped in the blood of a civil war. The author was almost sick with worry and shock, horrified as he was by the ‘hysterical frenzy of killing and destruction’ that he had seen with his own eyes in the summer of 1936, before he left the peninsula. Spain was his intellectual passion. In 1919 he had crossed the ‘whole yellow ox hide’ travelling in dirty third-class train carriages overflowing with peasants with their chickens and bundles of vegetables; he had slept in humble inns with their straw mattresses crawling with bedbugs and fleas, until he found the retreat he had been looking for, a small village lost in the Alpujarras, a landscape that seemed more like the mountains of Afghanistan or the Berber villages of North Africa than the heavily populated Europe he had come from, overshadowed by the devastating experience of the Great War.

Brenan saw Spain as being the country of a glorified feeling of ‘the homeland’, eastern thought, hunger and supply shortages, vast agricultural injustice, the almost religious fervour of popular anarchism, permanent calls to revolution, a country difficult to govern even at the best of times. In his opinion, the Civil War had been the explosion in the powder magazine that had slowly been accumulating, the scene of a drama in which the fortunes of the civilised world were being played out in miniature. Spain was not isolated from events in Europe, but its inhabitants were confronting very different social and economic situations which mirrored the political trends of the great powers only superficially and belatedly. ‘Everything to be found in Spain is *sui generis*.’¹ In 1949 Brenan went back and found a society held back by hardship, overcome by the worst sort of hangover, ‘the type that follows a civil war and reign of terror’. In the 1950s he returned for good to live in a country ‘in the

¹ Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth* (Cambridge University Press, 1943), p. xvii.

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disguise of modern European customs which it does not fit in with, and against which it offers a constant and not entirely conscious resistance', a territory which he still defined as 'enigmatic and disconcerting'.²

One might say that, more than anything else, the British Hispanicist's account symbolises the history of the twentieth century. In 1894, the year of his birth, Spain was a decrepit old empire on the eve of its final 'disaster'. The average lifespan of the population was no more than thirty-five years. Most Spaniards remained aloof from the political system, and many of them had to cross the Atlantic to former colonies to earn the bread they lacked in their own communities. It was a country of emigrants, victims of persecution and exile. And it was in exile that Alfonso XIII died, the king crowned at the beginning of the century, as did Primo de Rivera, the dictator who brought him down with him in his fall. Also to die in exile were the two presidents of the Second Republic, Alcalá Zamora and Azaña, and most of their prime ministers, as well as hundreds of thousands of others who at the end of the Civil War joined a mass exodus to escape from repression. Under Franco's regime, many Spaniards experienced internal exile imposed by silence and the struggle for survival, and several million men and women once more went abroad to look for work. Someone who never had to do this was Franco, who died in a hospital bed after nearly four decades of authoritarian power.

Brenan belonged to the same generation as Franco, being barely two years younger than the dictator. He died when he was nearly 93 years old, a long lifespan that was also a product of the change of centuries. By then Spain was a modern society fully integrated in the European community, a consolidated democracy that was growing and evolving at a remarkable rate. He was finally laid to rest, in the land that he had loved and studied so much, in January 2001, barely twenty days after the turn of the century, in a country that bore little resemblance to the one he had discovered eighty years previously. It was no longer an exotic, romantic destination for inquiring travellers looking for new sensations but a welcoming location chosen by waves of immigrants who had been displaced from their countries through poverty and insecurity.

Brenan's fame as a writer has survived him, but not his vision of the history of the peninsula: that has been overtaken by the analyses of younger Hispanicists and a generation of Spanish historians who, since the 1980s,

² Gerald Brenan, prologue from John Haycraft, *Babel in Spain* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958), p. 17. Details and comments on the life and work of the British Hispanicist are from his memoirs, *Autobiografía: una vida propia. Memoria personal (1920–1975)* (Barcelona: Península, 2003), and from the biography written by Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *Gerald Brenan: The Interior Castle* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson Ltd, 1994).

have been broadening their research topics, renewing their methods and also their ways of tackling and interpreting the past, to revise and take apart the most common clichés and misrepresentations. Today we know that the history of Spain in the first third of the twentieth century was not the chronicle of a secular frustration foretold, which of necessity was to finish up as a collective tragedy; an accumulation of failures and defects – of industry and agriculture, the bourgeoisie and the middle class, the state and civil society – which prevented the country from following the European path to progress and modernisation. The Restoration era was not a stagnant pool in which nothing moved; neither was the brief democratic experiment of the Second Republic the inevitable prologue to the Civil War; nor was the long-drawn-out Francoist dictatorship a parenthesis which, at the end of the day, favoured economic development and the advent of freedom; and the transition to democracy was never a perfect script previously written from the upper echelons of power.

The history of Spain did not run its course independently of the rest of Europe, nor was it any stranger to the social, economic, political and cultural transformations experienced by the rest of the continent. There were many more similarities than differences, particularly with its southern European neighbours. We historians also know that there is no ‘normal’ model of modernisation with which Spain could be contrasted as being an anomalous exception. Hardly any country in Europe resolved the conflicts of the 1930s and 1940s – the century’s dividing line – by peaceful means. In the subsequent ‘golden’ age, there was economic growth, and the welfare state expanded in monarchist as well as in republican countries, under social-democratic governments as well as Christian Democrat coalitions. Outside western Europe, the outlook is still bleak. The inequality gap has been growing instead of closing. One of the lessons that the twentieth century has taught us is that there was no direct path to progress, no single pattern that all the countries in the world could follow to achieve development and collective well-being.

Events followed their particular course but they could have been very different. The history of this century was pervaded by splits and regression, by violent revolutions and acrimonious conflicts between opposing ideologies, by totalitarian states and dictatorships of all colours, by world wars and unprecedented human disasters that have overshadowed the shining light of scientific discoveries and material improvements. One hundred years of brutality and civilisation, of civil victims and citizen conquests: the twentieth century also witnessed the most accelerated social changes in the history of mankind. This was a time that for Spain has meant the end of demographic transition, the disappearance of the traditional peasant world, the spread of education, the emancipation

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of women, the transport and communications revolution, the creation of public opinion and the extension of citizens' rights. At the beginning of the century there had been writers who spoke of the 'age of the masses', an almost pejorative concept that masked the fear of crowds taking to the streets to demand their rights, of majorities that were capable of bringing down governments at the polls. Now that the 1900s have passed into history, a more correct reading might be to talk of the century of the citizen, when ordinary people were given individual freedoms, political and employment rights, and the new social rights demanded by civil society. We have been all too quick to forget that these rights were not always within our reach, that they were not gratuitous concessions from the people in power but the collective achievements of entire generations and remarkable figures who were determined to improve the world they had been born into.

There are too many names, too many events for all of them to appear in a book that aims to encompass the history of the twentieth century in under four hundred pages. Some readers may miss a remark about a specific fact, mention of a relevant name or an account of a noteworthy event. A work of synthesis is always a limited selection. As historians, we select and classify the traces left by the past to construct overall interpretations that will help us to understand the most important historical issues. Anyone who is looking for a more detailed chronicle of events, a more thorough study of the economic variables, political events, social structures and cultural changes may do so with the aid of encyclopaedias, multi-volume collections and the most comprehensive works available in bookshops and libraries. Many works on twentieth-century Spain have been published in the last decade, some of them extremely good. But a non-specialist reader, a university student and a foreigner interested in learning about Spain's most recent history will all have problems in finding a compact book that relates the essential facts and explains the fundamental changes and processes of an intense, controversial and extraordinarily complex century.

This is the gap that this book aims to fill. The narrative follows the unifying thread of political history and the rhythm of conventional chronological divisions; later, at the end of each part and in the epilogue, it takes a more measured look at some of the more interesting thoughts and arguments of current Spanish historiography. Did the end of the Restoration clear the way for democracy? What was the significance of Primo de Rivera's dictatorship? What brought on the Civil War? What were the reasons for the Republic's defeat? Why did Franco's dictatorship last so long, and what mark did it make? What assessment can we make of the Transition after a quarter of a century of democracy? Questions, issues

and problems that continue to occupy the minds of experts in contemporary history.

The book also aspires to be an invitation to read other books, such as those appearing in the annotated bibliography at the end. Historical knowledge needs to break out from the academic sphere and reach a broader public, a new generation of Spaniards with no first-hand experience of this past century, a generation that needs to understand the complexity of past events to address the problems of the future. We historians are not antiquarians buried in archives, mindless of the world we live in. We are committed to society, writing from the present and aware that research is just part of our work. We have the obligation to teach and disseminate the long tortuous process that has brought us democracy, tolerance and peaceful coexistence. There is still work to be done. As Azaña said in the bull ring in Madrid, in a speech given in September 1930, ‘freedom does not make men free; it just makes them men’.³ The rest is up to us.

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³ Manuel Azaña, *Discursos políticos* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2004), p. 83.

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Part I

The monarchy of Alfonso XIII

1 The legacy of a century

The beginning of the twentieth century was not the start of a new historical period for Spain. The political regime of the Restoration, inaugurated on the return to the throne of the Bourbon dynasty and the approval of the 1876 Constitution, survived basically unchanged until 1923. Some texts take 1902, the year Alfonso XIII reached the age of majority, as the start of their history of the century; others begin with 1898, the year forever associated with the loss of the last colonies; and still others prefer to talk in a broader sense about the end-of-century or inter-century crisis, to place events in Spain at that time within the European context and to emphasise Spain's problems, plain to see in the 1890s, that were to provide the framework for the long political crisis in the first decades of the new century.

At any event, the change of century seems a good time to pause a moment and present a general overview of Spanish society; to explain, albeit briefly, the bases of the political system, the roots of the anti-dynastic opposition, the principal features of the social and economic structures and the evolution of the social movements, on the eve of what was to be called the century of the masses. With a snapshot taken around 1900 we can look back rather than forward, to show some of the basic problems and most important conflicts that would be bequeathed to the twentieth century. Among these problems were the insufficient nationalisation of the state, the limits of political representation, the weight of institutions such as the army or the Church, and the lack of legal channels to incorporate the demands of the populace. This chapter will give a rapid summary that, despite these problems, aims to quell the myth of failure as an explanatory model: a failure of industrialisation, the non-existence of a bourgeois revolution, the absence of agrarian modernisation, an archaic *cacique* system, mass demobilisation. In fact, as recent historiography has shown, the society that experienced the *Desastre* of '98 was more dynamic, modern and complex than portrayed by contemporaries who so successfully disseminated the clichéd image of decadence and stagnation.

The *Desastre del '98*

‘Surrender is unavoidable.’ So wrote General Arsenio Linares, under siege by the North Americans in Santiago de Cuba on 12 July 1898, in an official cable describing the harrowing situation being suffered by the city’s defenders, who had been decimated by the battles of San Juan and El Caney, and were exhausted, sick and starving: ‘We have been suffering constant rainfall in the trenches for twenty hours; the men have no shelter, and they have only rice to eat and cannot change or wash their clothes.’ More than a week had passed since the sinking of Admiral Pascual Cervera’s squadron, outside the bay, and few doubted that the US flag would soon be flying in the city’s Plaza de Armas. If the struggle went on, said the general, ‘we would only be prolonging the agony; sacrifice is futile’. His note went beyond an analysis of the military situation. The final lines, devoted to describing the morale of the troops, were almost a summary of the characteristics of the conflict and, to a certain extent, also a harbinger of the critical pens that were to portray the defeat as a *Desastre* with a capital D: ‘These defenders are no longer beginning a campaign full of enthusiasm and energy: for three years they have been battling against the climate, deprivation and fatigue, and these critical circumstances have come about when they no longer have any stamina or physical strength, nor the means to regain them. They lack idealism, because they are defending the property of those who, in their presence, have abandoned it, and of those who they are up against, allied to the American forces.’¹

Four days later the act of capitulation – in reality an unconditional surrender – was signed which, in practice, was to mean the end of the war. The ceremonial laying down of arms took place on the morning of 17 July, on the outskirts of Santiago de Cuba. The march past of the Spanish troops in front of the United States leaders symbolised, perhaps more than any other image, the end of one era and the beginning of another. It was the Spanish empire’s final significant display of force of arms, before the uniforms of the army that, in the following century, was to impose its supremacy all over the world. As Lord Salisbury had said previously that year, in his famous speech at the Albert Hall in London on 4 May, three days after the naval defeat at Cavite, in Philippine waters: ‘You may roughly divide the nations of the world as the living and dying.’ On the one hand, explained the British prime minister, you had great countries that year after year were growing in power, wealth and military strength; on the

¹ Letter from General Arsenio Linares to the Captain General of the Island of Cuba, General Ramón Blanco, 12 Jul. 1898, Archivo General Militar de Madrid, Fondo de Ultramar, Caja 5.798.

other, states in which disorganisation and decadence were swiftly taking over: 'Decade after decade, they are weaker, poorer and less provided with leading men or institutions in which they can trust.' Decadence, poverty, poor administration and corruption formed a 'terrible picture' that the press were describing 'with darker and more conspicuous lineaments'. This was the tone that filled the pages of the Spanish newspapers when they learnt the harsh reality of a defeat that, although foreseen, no one expected to be so swift, humiliating or embarrassing.

The war in Cuba had begun in February 1895 with the famous *Grito de Baire*, an insurrection well organised by leaders such as Máximo Gómez, Antonio Maceo and José Martí. At the end of March, Práxedes Mateo Sagasta's government, which had declared its intention to defend Spanish sovereignty to the last peseta and the last man, handed over the reins to Antonio Cánovas del Castillo, who was also intent on sending ship after ship from the peninsula to put down the rebellion. The 15,000 soldiers present on the island at the beginning of spring grew to more than 100,000 at the end of the year, to reach more than 200,000 in subsequent years. It was, as Manuel Moreno points out, the biggest military operation ever undertaken by a colonial power in America, a deployment that was to be surpassed only by the American entry into the Second World War.² For the time being, in 1895, the accumulation of troops did not achieve the desired result. News arriving from Cuba spoke of the encounters with the *mambises* (Cuban insurgents) as being victories, but the insurrection, far from being smothered, was growing. The rebels rejected open combat and wore down the Spanish units with their greater mobility, their knowledge of the terrain and the support they received from the civilian population.

The captain general, Arsenio Martínez Campos, labelled as weak, was replaced in January 1896 by Valeriano Weyler, a soldier with a reputation for harshness which he was soon to show with his decision to wage 'war with war'. The Spanish columns, in gruelling advances and setbacks, relentlessly harassed the rebels who were isolated by the *trochas*, the fortified lines crossing the island from north to south to cut off the nuclei of rebellion. Concentrating the rural population around the towns and garrisons, destroying crops and peasant dwellings, and banning harvesting activities were examples of the scorched earth policy designed to eradicate the social and economic foundations of the independence movement. This extreme war strategy, which harmed Spain's external image and was denounced as being cruel and inhumane, provided the United States with the argument it needed to justify its belligerence and a possible military

² Manuel Moreno Fraguinals, *Cuba/España, España/Cuba* (Barcelona: Crítica, 1995).

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intervention, not just in the islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico, which were near its coast, but also in the Philippines; it was there, in August 1896, that there had been an independence rebellion which forced the Spanish government to send 30,000 troops to the faraway archipelago under the command of General Camilo Polavieja, another inflexible officer who wasted no time in having the nationalist leader, José Rizal, shot.

Before the end of the year, the death of one of the rebel leaders, Antonio Maceo, was received with jubilation by the Spanish public, and it seemed to augur a change of direction in the conflict. But the popular celebrations were merely a mirage that disappeared in the early months of 1897, revealing a reality that did not match the optimistic tone of Weyler's reports. The truth was that neither the destruction of crops and dwellings nor the large concentrations of troops, costly in men and resources, succeeded in eliminating the rebel bands, who moved around unhindered in the centre and east of the island and relentlessly harassed the supply detachments and convoys. Despite the fact that all the major towns remained in Spanish hands, the insurgents were masters of the countryside, a situation that was maintained, basically unchanged, until the end of the war. The arrival of the new summer, in the middle of the dreaded rainy season, became the expeditionary force's worst enemy. Barely 4% of the more than 50,000 soldiers who died in Cuba were victims of war wounds. Most of them died from yellow fever, malaria, dysentery, typhoid and other tropical diseases that fed on bodies that were exhausted, ill fed and ill equipped. It is no wonder that Máximo Gómez claimed that his best generals were called June, July and August.

It was while this was going on that the Spanish prime minister, Antonio Cánovas, was assassinated by an Italian-born anarchist, Michele Angiolillo, at the Santa Águeda spa resort in the Basque region of Guipúzcoa. The death of the conservative leader was also the end of Weyler. The new Liberal government, with Práxedes Sagasta once more directing the war, sent General Ramón Blanco to Cuba, with orders that included the repeal of the exceptional measures, a comprehensive pardon for prisoners and exiles, and a wide-ranging programme of self-government reforms. But it was too late. The rebels had gone too far to consider any outcome other than independence from Spain. During the first few months of 1898 the Army of Independence continued its offensive in the eastern half of the island, forcing the Spanish to abandon their most exposed positions and retreat to their strongholds, a strategy that was also reinforced by the intervention of the United States in the conflict and the fear of a possible landing near the major towns.

The blowing up of the battleship USS *Maine* in Havana harbour, probably due to an accident, was the excuse for which the Americans