

Political violence in the Republican zone of Spain during the Spanish Civil War: evolving historiographical perspectives

The issue of violence committed behind the lines on Republican and Francoist territory during the Spanish Civil War burns at the heart of the memory wars currently being fought in Spanish society over the meanings of the country's recent, traumatic past. In the academic sphere, debate amongst historians regarding the causes and meanings of violence carried out against and among the civilian population during the conflict is more strongly present and more heated than ever before. Today, historians who wish to tackle the subject of this violence still find themselves faced with the task of unpicking and challenging the Manichean narratives of the conflict's meaning established by the Franco Dictatorship and reinforced by it for four decades. The regime's official history portrayed the Civil War as a simple battle between good and evil, between the patriotic, Catholic saviours of Spain and the barbaric, atheistic, foreign enemies who had attacked them. The emphasis on collective forgetting which underlay the post-1975 transition to democracy, a process grounded in strong institutional continuity between the Franco regime and Spain's democracy-under construction, has allowed many elements of this interpretive framework to survive into the present day.¹

The analytical challenges posed by the survival of Francoist narratives are perhaps felt most keenly by those scholars who seek to understand the roughly 50,000 killings carried out in the Republican zone following the military coup of July 1936. For almost four decades, the Dictatorship honoured and celebrated those killed as the martyred victims of atheist barbarity, of the 'anti-Spain'. The fact of their deaths was used by Franco propagandists and religious personnel to justify an illegal coup against a democratically elected government, to legitimate the Franco war effort, and to construct an image of both the pre-war and wartime Second Republic as a hotbed of anarchy, lawlessness, killing and destruction.² This enduring representation ignored the reality that the conditions which allowed the wave of revolutionary violence to occur were created by the fragmentation of Republican state power provoked by the coup itself.³ Furthermore – and perhaps most damagingly for current scholars of the violence – it ignored both the long term, structural causes of the violence and the identities of the perpetrators themselves, all of whom were subsumed into the general descriptive category of the 'atheistic red hordes'.⁴

Since the 1980s, historians inside and outside Spain have been working to dismantle these distorted Francoist narratives regarding violence in both zones during the Civil War. The period following the transition up to the present has witnessed the appearance of an avalanche of volumes written on Francoist violence by both academic and non-academic historians. The subject of repression in the Republican zone, meanwhile, has received far less attention. This imbalance has its roots in historical circumstance. When Spain began to take its first, faltering steps towards democratisation after November 1975, progressive historians were acutely aware that a vast amount of literature had already been produced on the subject of the 'red terror' by the Franco regime, its supporters and representatives of the Catholic Church. Spain's foremost specialist on violence on Republican territory, José Luis Ledesma, has identified 489 studies on the subject published between 1936 and 1975, 96 per cent of which were propagandistic and martyrological works.⁵ The memory of the 'martyrs' of violence in the Republican zone was used throughout the life of the dictatorship – but especially during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s – as a tool in the brutal forging and legitimisation of the Francoist State and national community.

In contrast to this 'omnipresent image of the martyrs', Francoist violence behind the lines and the brutal repression of those branded as members of the 'anti-Spain' during 1940s and early 1950s – which had caused the deaths of around 150,000 people – was conspicuously and predictably absent from the regime's official version of history.⁶ This state of affairs meant that in 1975, tens of thousands of the victims of Francoist violence had still not been located, identified or commemorated – a situation which persists into the present. Faced with this gaping quantitative and qualitative historiographical imbalance, progressive historians understandably concentrated their efforts on analysing Francoist violence.⁷

One of the unfortunate results of this dearth of detailed empirical work on the theme of repression in the Republican zone, understandable as it was, was that historians sympathetic to the Republic and to its wartime plight tended to generalise the violence as a spontaneous, largely meaningless phenomenon carried out by criminals and 'uncontrollable elements' in the wake of the complete collapse of the Republican state.⁸ The birth of the image of the *incontrolado*, which was at times uncomfortably close to the bloodthirsty mobs and wicked rabbles conjured up by

Francoist and ecclesiastical propaganda, was also caused by a collective reluctance amongst progressive historians to tackle a phenomenon that had caused deep embarrassment to the Government of the Second Republic and besmirched its reputation, especially on the international stage.

Today, following decades of meticulous and extremely necessary research by historians into Francoist killings, empirically rigorous and conceptually adventurous academic studies on violence in the Republican zone are now appearing in growing numbers. The new historians of this repression propose differing interpretations of the violence and write from divergent political perspectives. However, they share one key goal: that of breaking down the unhelpful image of the *incontrolado* in order to uncover the identities of the perpetrators and understand the logics which drove their violent actions.⁹ Their work builds on the foundations laid by the few detailed and reflexive studies on the topic which appeared during the 1980s and 1990s,¹⁰ and also on Paul Preston's *The Spanish Holocaust*, the most thoroughly catalogued account of violence committed behind the lines of both sides during the Spanish Civil War published to date, and the final product of decades of painstaking research.¹¹ A number of historians, including one of the contributors to a recent forum published in the *Journal of Contemporary History* have suggested that efforts to understand the deeply-rooted causes of violence on Republican territory are in fact tantamount to 'justifying and excusing revolutionary violence.'¹² However, a detailed examination of recently-published work on violence in the Republican zone shows that its authors do not seek to 'justify' the violence or to exonerate the Republic from responsibility for it, but to explain why and how it happened.

The British historian Chris Ealham has made pioneering attempts to unravel this 'why and how' in his rigorous grassroots studies of the intersections between working-class lived experience, state repression and anarchist ideology in early twentieth-century Barcelona. Ealham roundly rejects the image of the *incontrolado*. Instead, his analysis of 1936's violence demonstrates that repressive acts in the Catalan capital were generally committed by locally-recruited armed revolutionary groups composed of activists from the principal pre-Civil War anti-fascist organisations, and underpinned by a coherent logic firmly grounded in the radical remaking of social relations.¹³ José Luis Ledesma has developed this approach by profiling the 'faces of the repression' and

showing that in eastern Aragón the perpetrators of revolutionary violence were drawn from across the left and Republican organised political base, as well as from sectors that not been politically active before July 1936. Crucially, Ledesma moves away from traditional interpretations that proportion blame for the violence almost solely upon the anarchist movement, demonstrating how competing groups used violence not only to eliminate perceived enemies, but also to open and secure 'political spaces' for themselves within the new order being constructed on Republican territory in the wake of the coup. Ledesma avoids reductionist readings which establish rigid connections between human actions and political militancy. As such, he does not shy away from examining the implication of members of moderate Republican political organisations in violent acts.¹⁴ The work of Alfonso Natividad Hernandis, which addresses post-coup violence in l'Horta Nord (Valencia), also points to this political and social heterogeneity amongst perpetrators who 'shared a series of common sociocultural enemies'. He sustains that 'both a Republican and a Socialist might try to eliminate [these enemies] to build a new society, even if these societies were very different from one another'.¹⁵

Perhaps most crucially, Ledesma also introduces important nuances into the long-established, comfortable idea that Republican state collapsed completely as a result of the coup, creating a power vacuum that was filled by 'uncontrollable' groups. Instead, he constructs a detailed account of the 'fragmentation of power' which took place on Republican territory.¹⁶ He examines the process by which, with the Republic's army and security services paralysed, fragmented but still partially intact in some places, 'local powers, revolutionary organisations and even sectors of the State' found themselves engaged in a chaotic competition to control repressive practices and administer 'justice'.¹⁷ These conclusions are supported by Fernando Jiménez Herrera, another of this new generation of historians of the repression, who has constructed a detailed picture of the overlapping and competing administrative and repressive actions carried out by newly-formed committees and militia groups, existing political centres and state bodies in the municipality of Vallecas in Madrid. His examination of the role of town councils fighting to cling on to authority in carrying out killings at the start of the conflict supports his assertion that the state, rather than 'collapsing', became 'just another actor in the fight for power'.¹⁸

Ledesma has also examined the complex process by which the Republican authorities struggled to rebuild the splintered state machinery of coercion and the judicial system, attempting to stem the tide of popular violence by redirecting it into legal channels. At a local level, this delicate, obstacle-strewn process of negotiation and accommodation with groups of armed workers organised into committees and militia groups frequently implicated state actors even further in extrajudicial violence. Paul Preston, whose research was described as biased, militant and lacking in balance by some of the contributors to the JCH forum, does not ignore or soften this implication.¹⁹ *The Spanish Holocaust*, for instance, analyses the wave of brutal repression unleashed by the *Comité Provincial de Investigación Pública*, formed in Madrid by Director General of Security Manuel Muñoz in a failed attempt to incorporate representatives of workers organisations into state-sponsored judicial and coercive bodies. Preston also examines extrajudicial killings carried out from within the ranks of the capital's police force-under-reconstruction.²⁰ Lucía Prieto Borrego and Encarnación Barranquero Texeira, who have examined the Republican authorities' establishment of 'popular tribunals' in Malaga, similarly acknowledge that some of the new groups which emerged at the start of the war 'enjoyed a measure of institutional support and a number of them even played a role in the government court system.'²¹

The perspectives outlined above present a detailed and frank account of the fragmented Republican State's implication in repression. However, their authors emphasise the Republican Government's fundamental opposition to grassroots violence, outlining the authorities' attempts to bring the wave of repression under control, a process which was virtually complete by mid-1937. In doing so, they underline the fundamental difference between violence in the Franco zone – which was encouraged, sanctioned and coordinated by the military and political high command and which lasted for the duration of the war and into the 1950s – and the violence which unfolded on Republican territory.²² It is true that the marked tendency to view Republican violence in a comparative light, strongly present in historiography since the 1980s, has often worked to obscure its status as a specific phenomenon with its own logics and meanings.²³ However, in 2016 historians still need to insist upon this distinction for a number of reasons.

Firstly, a number of historians currently working both inside and outside Spain – some of whom contributed to the aforementioned JCH forum – continue to argue that repression in the Republican zone was the ‘exact flipside’ of Franco violence. They use this argument of ‘similarity’ to claim that the fundamental cause of the violence was not the coup itself, but the ‘exclusionist’ discourse constructed by Socialist and Republican political leaders between 1931 and 1936. Indeed, Fernando del Rey has portrayed the coup as an excuse for left-wing activists to carry out an ‘ideological cleansing’ whose origins lay in the rhetoric of the radical sector of the Socialist movement.²⁴ Similar arguments have been proposed by Julius Ruiz, a British historian of Francoist and Republican violence. Ruiz’s work had made some useful contributions to the task of deconstructing the image of the *incontrolado* and revealing the involvement of state agencies in revolutionary violence. However, his central contention that terror was as integral to the Republic’s war effort as it was to Franco’s, as well as his insistence that the bellicose discourse of the Republic’s political leaders provides the explanation for unrest and violence both before and after the coup, seems to ignore much of what is already widely known regarding the vast quantitative and qualitative differences between violence in the two zones, and about the Republican Government’s complete rejection of the violence unfolding on its territory.²⁵

These scholars are keen to stress their distance from Francoist discourses and their credentials as ‘objective’ historians. However, their interpretations do sometimes bear troubling similarities to old Francoist myths concerning the alleged collapse of law and order in Spain following the February 1936 Popular Front election victory, and the supposed imminence of a social revolution. Both of these arguments were used by the Dictatorship and its historians to conflate the violence that occurred before and after the coup, justifying their military intervention as necessary to restore order to the country. However, as Eduardo González Calleja, one of the foremost specialists on political violence working in Spain today has demonstrated, the myth of ‘uncontrolled violence’ during the spring of 1936 is just that: while social turbulence and protest undoubtedly increased after the elections, the state remained firmly in control of its machinery of coercion. Indeed, the majority of those killed during the period died at the hands of the security forces themselves, rather than being killed by either left-wing or right-wing activists.²⁶

Francoist myths surrounding the spring of 1936 and the responsibility of the Republican Government for revolutionary violence are more overtly present today in the work of the pro-Franco historians who ignore the radically different circumstances of the periods of the pre-war and wartime Second Republic in order to suggest that the entire Republican experience was one of lawlessness, violence and destruction.²⁷ These narratives are similarly evident in martyrological literature produced by religious personnel, lay Catholics and by the Spanish ecclesiastical authorities themselves. This literature, which is being published today in abundant quantities, records the deaths of the almost 7,000 religious personnel who fell victim to revolutionary violence. Its discourse traces its origins back to the Civil War and post-war period, and to the institutional Church's unwavering support for Franco's repressive project and its collaboration in the construction of the Francoist war effort as a 'crusade' against what it saw as the violent atheism of the Second Republic. The martyrologists' portrayal of the Spanish Civil War as a holy battle between good and evil, and their disingenuous conflation of the secularising measures pursued by pre-war Republican governments with the anticlerical and revolutionary violence of the summer of 1936, demonstrate that some Catholic sectors' readings of twentieth-century Spanish history are still underpinned by the Francoist ideas and discourses which the Church itself played a key role in forging.²⁸

The attitude of Spain's current, ultraconservative ecclesiastical hierarchy regarding violence in both zones of Spain is demonstrated even more explicitly by the episcopate's enthusiastic promotion of the beatifications of the ecclesiastical victims of violence in the Republican zone, a process which began in the late 1980s. The ecclesiastical hierarchy's justification of this support revolves around the idea that the Church was nothing more than an innocent victim of the violence, an interpretation which ignores both its active role in the social and political conflicts of the 1930s and its legitimisation of Francoist violence during the Civil War and Dictatorship.²⁹ Significantly, this defence of the 'martyred Church' is accompanied by opposition to the activities of civic memory associations working to locate and commemorate the victims of Francoist repression. The official ecclesiastical position regarding these activities, and the 2007 Historical Memory Law which established structures to fund them, is that they are 'reopening old wounds'.³⁰

This stance is more broadly significant because it is almost identical to that of Spain's governing Popular Party and many of the conservative sectors which support it, who condemn any initiatives to investigate Francoist violence as wilful attempts to disrupt peaceful coexistence. Indeed, one of the contributors to the JCH forum echoed these sentiments, stating that: 'the duty of the historian is not to revive and deepen the traumatic division of the Civil War, especially as these have been overcome by Spaniards for decades'.³¹ This position, of course, ignores the ongoing pain of thousands of families whose loved ones were murdered by the Franco regime and buried in unmarked graves. In a situation where the Dictatorship used the memory of revolutionary violence for decades to stigmatise all the Republic's supporters as violent, atheistic hordes unworthy of being commemorated or even remembered, historians' task of deconstructing still-powerful Francoist narratives by conducting meticulous, well-documented, honest research into violence in the Republican zone is more necessary than ever.

¹ On this process see F. Espinosa Maestre, *Shoot the messenger? Spanish democracy and the crimes of Francoism: from the pact of silence to the trial of Baltasar Garzón* (Brighton 2013) and P. Aguilar, *Memory and Amnesia: the role of the Spanish Civil war in the transition to democracy* (Oxford 2002).

² The key example is the *Causa General* state investigation initiated in 1940 and first published as *Causa General. La dominación roja en España. Avance de la información instruida por el Ministerio Público* (Madrid 1943).

³ See J. Casanova, 'Rebelión y revolución', in S. Juliá (ed.), *Víctimas de la guerra civil* (Madrid 1999), pp. 61-62 and J. L. Ledesma, 'La santa ira popular del 36: La violencia en guerra civil y revolución, entre cultura y política', in J. Muñoz et al. (eds.), *Culturas y políticas de la violencia España Siglo XX* (Madrid 2005), pp. 179-82.

⁴ On this discourse see C. González Martínez, 'La Causa General de Murcia: Técnicas de Estudio', in I. Sánchez, M. Ortiz and D. Ruiz (eds.), *España franquista: Causa General y actitudes sociales ante la dictadura* (Albacete 1993).

⁵ J. L. Ledesma, 'El 1936 más opaco: las violencias en la zona republicana durante la guerra civil y sus narrativas', *Historia Social*, 58 (2007), p.153.

⁶ Quote from G. Gómez Bravo, *El exilio interior: cárcel y represión en la España franquista 1939 – 1950* (Madrid 2009), pp. 46-57. See also J. L. Ledesma and J. Rodrigo, 'Caídos por España, mártires de la libertad. Víctimas y conmemoración de la Guerra Civil en la España posbélica (1939-2006)', *Ayer* 63, 2006, p.237.

⁷ One of the few, and probably the most significant, studies of Republican repression during this period was J. M. Solé i Sabaté and J. Villarroya i Font, *La repressió a la retaguarda de Catalunya, 1936 – 1939* (Barcelona 1989).

⁸ Two examples are A. Reig Tapia, *Ideología e historia: sobre la represión franquista y la guerra civil* (Madrid 1986), p.123-25 and P. Preston, *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War* (London: Fontana Press, 1996), p.91.

⁹ See, for example J. L. Ledesma, *Los días de llamas de la revolución: Violencia y política en la retaguardia republicana durante la guerra civil* (Zaragoza 2003); J. Ruíz, "'Incontrolables" en la zona republicana durante la guerra civil: el caso de Luis Bonilla Echevarria' *Historia y Política*, vol. 21 (June 2009), pp. 191-218; E. Casanova,

La violencia política en la retaguardia republicana de Teruel durante la Guerra Civil (Teruel 2007); M. Thomas, *The Faith and the Fury: Popular Anticlerical Violence and Iconoclasm in Spain, 1931-1936* (Brighton 2012).

¹⁰ These studies were Solé i Sabaté and Villarroja i Font, *La repressió a la retaguarda de Catalunya*; J. Cervera Gil, *Madrid en guerra: La ciudad clandestina, 1936-1939* (Madrid 1998) and the relevant chapters in S. Juliá (ed.) *Víctimas de la guerra civil* (Madrid 1999).

¹¹ P. Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (London: HarperCollins, 2012).

¹² F. del Rey, 'The Spanish Second Republic and Political Violence', *Journal of Contemporary History*, April 2016; 51 (2), p.3. See also M. Álvarez Tardío, '¿Para cuándo un debate histórico sin prejuicios? A propósito de la reseña de Samuel Pierce sobre *El Precio de la Exclusión: La política durante la Segunda República*', *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* 36:1 (2011), p. 154.

¹³ C. Ealham, *Class Culture and Conflict in Barcelona 1898-1937* (London 2005), pp. 158-59.

¹⁴ Ledesma, *Días de llamas*, pp. 235-60.

¹⁵ A. Natividad Herandis, 'Revolución y represión: la retaguardia valenciana entre julio de 1936 y marzo de 1937. El caso de l'Horta Nord', in *Actas Congreso Posguerras: 75 Aniversario Fin de la Guerra Civil* (Madrid 2015), p. 2.

¹⁶ Ledesma's work builds on Helen Graham's crucial study of this process in *The Spanish Republic at War* (Cambridge 2002), pp. 79-130.

¹⁷ J. L. Ledesma, 'Total War behind the Frontlines? : An Inquiry into the Violence on the Republican Side in the Spanish Civil War', in M. Baumeister and S. Schüler-Springorum, *'If you tolerate this': the Spanish Civil War in the age of total war* (Frankfurt; New York 2008). See also the author's forthcoming national study, provisionally entitled *Las justicias del pueblo. Violencia y revolución en la zona republicana durante la Guerra Civil española* (Barcelona forthcoming).

¹⁸ F. Jiménez Herrera, 'El Terror Rojo: Discursos y realidades sobre la violencia en la zona republicana. El caso de Madrid' (Madrid forthcoming). By the same autor see 'El Comité Provincial de Investigación Pública a través de la documentación custodiado en al Archivo General Militar de Madrid', *Hispania Nova*, 12 (2014). <http://e-REVISTAS.uc3m.es/index.php/HISPNOV/issue/view/362>

¹⁹ R. Villa García, 'The Second Republic: Myths and Realities', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 51, 2 (April 2016), pp. 423-44; M. Álvarez Tardío and F. del Rey Reguillo, introduction to their edited volume *The Spanish Second Republic Revisited: From Democratic Hopes to Civil War (1931-1936)* (Brighton 2012), p.7.

²⁰ Preston, *Spanish Holocaust*, pp. 272-99.

²¹ L. Prieto Borrego and E. Barranquero Texeira, 'Repression and Popular Justice in a City behind the Lines: Málaga, July 1936-February 1937', in P. Anderson and M. A. del Arco Blanco (eds.), *Grappling with the Past: Mass Violence in Spain 1936 – 1952* (Oxon 2015), pp. 91-109.

²² Preston, *Spanish Holocaust*, pp.264-65.

²³ For a discussion of these dangers see Ledesma, 'El 1936 más opaco', pp.157-58

²⁴ F. del Rey, 'Por tierras de la Mancha: Apuntes sobre la violencia revolucionara en la Guerra Civil española (1936-1939)', *Alcores*, 11 (2011), pp.261-62. For further examples of the 'exclusion' argument see M. Álvarez Tardío and R. Villa García, *El precio de la exclusión: la política durante la Segunda República* (Madrid 2010).

²⁵ J. Ruiz, *The 'Red Terror' and the Spanish Civil War: Revolutionary Violence in Madrid* (Cambridge 2014), pp. 16-41.

²⁶ E. González Calleja, 'La necro-lógica de la violencia sociopolítica en la primavera de 1936', *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* 41-1 (2011), pp. 37-60. By the same autor see 'La historiografía sobre la violencia política en la Segunda República española: una reconsideración', *Hispania Nova*, 11 (2013). See also H. Graham, 'Reform as Promise and Threat: Political Progressives and Blueprints for Change in Spain, 1931-6', in H. Graham (ed.), *Interrogating Francoism: history and dictatorship in twentieth-century Spain* (London 2016), pp.86-87.

²⁷ For examples of this interpretation see P. Moa, *Los crímenes de la Guerra Civil y otras polémicas* (Madrid 2004); J. M. Zavala, *Los gángsters de la Guerra Civil* (Barcelona 2007); J. J. Esparza, *El terror rojo en España: una revisión de la "Causa General"* (Barcelona 2007).

²⁸ V. Cárcel Ortí, *La gran persecución: España, 1931-1939* (Barcelona 2000) and *Persecuciones religiosas y mártires del siglo XX* (Madrid 2001), *La persecución religiosa en España durante la Segunda República, 1931-1939* (Madrid 1990). See also M. Encarnación González (ed.), *Quiénes son y de dónde vienen. 498 mártires del siglo XX en España* (Madrid 2007).

²⁹ On the beatifications see M. Berrettini, 'The Spanish Catholic Church from the Zapatero Era to the Rajoy Government', in B. Field and A. Botti (eds.), *Politics and Society in Contemporary Spain: From Zapatero to Rajoy* (New York 2013), pp. 161-78.

³⁰ Asamblea Plenaria de la Conferencia Episcopal, 'Orientaciones morales ante la situación actual de España', 23 October 2006.

³¹ R. Villa García, 'The Second Republic: Myths and Realities', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 51, 2 (April 2016), p.424.