

The International Context of the Spanish Civil War

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Edited by

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The International Context of the Spanish Civil War, Edited by Gaynor Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

In the first chapter of this book, Antony Adamthwaite refers to the comment made by George Orwell in his 1937 essay, *Spilling the Spanish Beans*, that “there has been a deliberate conspiracy ...to prevent the Spanish situation from being understood”.¹ This comment by the British socialist author and journalist provides a useful starting point to explain the rationale for this book. That said, none of the authors in this volume claim at any point that there has been a conspiracy to prevent scholars from understanding the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939. But what many historians would accept, both within the pages of this book and elsewhere, is that we are still a long way from having a complete picture not only of the course of the war, with its immense regional variations and extraordinary brutality, but of how it was viewed within its international context.² It is that latter with which this volume is concerned. Its aim is to raise the profile of the conflict within the historiography of European international history during the 1930s. This is a particularly important task because there is a danger that in 2009, the need to mark the seventieth anniversary of the end of the war in Spain will be subsumed by the clamour of historians and the academic media to commemorate the beginning of the other great global event of 1939, the Second World War.³

But it is also not the intention of this book to suggest that there is no connection between the war in Spain and the outbreak of the Second World War. As the present author’s chapter argues, it is important to remember that the war in Spain was the first conflict on western European soil since the First World War. Its relatively ‘local’ nature also gave the conflict a strategic immediacy to Europe’s industrial powers that, for example, Mussolini’s war in Abyssinia a year earlier generally had not. Another important point to consider here is the element of diplomatic control. That lay at the heart of the democratic powers’ appeasement agenda - a diplomatic strategy designed to leave the decision when or if to wage war to a time to be determined by them and not by the autocrats on the extreme political right and left. The outbreak of the war in Spain, which was an international conflict from its inception, and which was outside the mainstream of British, American and French diplomatic strategic thinking on the likely origin of a second European war, always had the potential to undermine that strategy. And, indeed as many of the

chapters in this volume argue, that is indeed what happened and it is that which partly binds an analysis of the international context of the Spanish Civil War with the decent into European and later world war after 1939.

The majority of the chapters are based on papers presented at an international conference held at the University of Salford, UK, in June 2006, whose principal focus was the attitude of the democratic powers in Europe and North America to the Spanish Civil War. However, when contemplating publication of the papers, the present author decided that a more valuable book would result if the focus was broadened to include all of the principal powers interested in the conflict. That is, to add discussion of the diplomatic and military priorities of the Soviet Union, Germany and Italy. It was also the intention to include a chapter on a second Eastern European country, especially one in which the extreme right were particularly powerful, such as in Hungary or Rumania but it proved to be impossible to track down material in sufficient quantity to make this possible. Each of the chapters also serves a different function within the book. Some, such as those by Stone, Adamthwaite, Cassels and Keylor, deal with the attitude of a particular country or alliance to the conflict. While others such as those by Stedman and the present author provide a useful reminder of the extent to which international diplomacy during the later 1930s was profoundly shaped by the attitude and priorities of politicians and statesmen with a firm sense of their own agenda. This was a period, like no other in the recent past, where the principal actors on the diplomatic stage often quite literally embodied their particular ideological agendas. Few would dispute this claim about Franco, Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini. But it was also true that when Chamberlain met the Führer for his 'summit' meetings over Czechoslovakia in 1938 and 1939, he was not simply the representative of the British government, but of the entire liberal-democratic agenda that had invested so much in preserving peace by whatever means possible since the Armistice in 1918.⁴ This point is also alluded to in Keylor's chapter on the attitude of the American President, Franklin Roosevelt, towards the growing threat of war in Europe during the late 1930s, with its emphasis on how Roosevelt's attitude towards European affairs was shaped especially by William Dodd and William Bullitt, American ambassadors to Berlin and Paris respectively. In contrast, Neville's chapter reminds us of how many of the issues discussed in this book were perceived from yet another perspective, that of the civil servant. His chapter demonstrates how useful it would be to have a study of what could be termed the Foreign Office or Foreign Ministry 'mind' for this period. That is policy making not simply from the perspective of those charged with its execution on the international arena,

but an understanding of how the bureaucratic 'layers' beneath viewed and prioritised international issues.

This volume brings together a mixture of internationally renowned scholars on the diplomacy of international relations in the 1930s and more junior scholars who, nevertheless, are all published authorities in their fields. The book examines two inter-connected themes: the relationship between ideology and war. Secondly, the chapters also address the connection between the policymaking elites in government and the foreign services and the actual formulation and execution of the foreign policies of the countries under consideration. Thus the book examines the perception that the European and North American 'official mind' had of the conflict in Spain, both those who opposed Franco and from those that did not. The chapters dealing with the fascist powers in Europe also illustrate that these themes cannot be addressed adequately without reference to the military planning and strategy of these countries.

The introduction to many edited collections simply summarises the contents of the chapters. It is particularly tempting to adopt this approach here with a book that lends itself on first examination to a natural country-by-country focus. While this strategy is not without merit, it fails to bring into focus one of the great challenges to historians writing about almost any aspect of twentieth century international history, and that is the immensely complex inter-relationship between the cause and effect of war especially during the interwar period. Indeed any book about the context in which any event occurred, be it a war, revolution or the life of a politician or diplomat, must focus on that 'mesh' of factors rather than on a single strand. Consequently, scholars interested in the history of the Spanish Civil War, the campaigns and its domestic impact, will find this book of only limited relevance. As it is this book works on four levels. The first aim of this introduction is to draw out and discuss the major themes identified across the chapters to try to give a sense of coherence to the project. Second, from the perspective of the chapter: each offering a short, self-contained, detailed study of the attitude and approach taken by one of the major participants in the Spanish Civil War. Thirdly, the book has a clear academic rationale that sits well within the existing historiography on the subject. Lastly, the book plugs an important gap in the Spanish Civil War seventieth anniversary literature produced since 2006 that has hitherto concentrated on the dynamics of Spanish cultural and domestic politics.

As many of the contributors to this book note, many of the questions historians have asked about the international context of the Spanish Civil War in the past continue to have a resonance for scholars today. For

example, the extent to which the Spanish Civil War was a 'dress rehearsal' for the Second World War as the protagonists were grouped together in a similar during both conflicts, with the exception of the Soviet Union. And, indeed, the extent to which the Soviet Union stood alone in the international diplomacy of the 1930s is the subject of the last chapter of this book. This book does not address this question directly. But it is hoped that it will inject fresh energy into our understanding of European affairs during the closing years before the outbreak of the Second World War to enable further discussion of that question to take place.

A second question that has occupied the minds of historians is the extent to which it is appropriate to refer to the Spanish Civil War as a civil war. On first examination, the question appears to be straightforward: how could a conflict whose external participants were at least as important as the domestic combatants be described as a civil war? And, indeed, there is the even simpler question: how could any war be described as a civil war that had external participants? Part of the answer to these questions lies first in the era in which the war was fought and, second, the geographical region of the conflict. The Spanish Civil War, like its American predecessor in the 1860s, was what could be termed an industrial war. Indeed, in many respects the American Civil War was caused by the disparity between the industrial economic and commercial development of the north east of the United States and the more conservative South. As in the war in Spain seventy years later, both sides in the conflict also used the technological advances in the development of weapon capability brought about by the industrial revolution to devastating effect. A further consequence of industrialisation in North America and western and southern Europe during this period was the creation of a more global economy. Political and economic instability within a country were more likely to have ramifications outside its borders than in the pre-industrial era and thus more likely to prompt external involvement in the crisis. The war in Spain was thus, as a number of the contributors to the book point out, in fact a European civil war.

Ironically, in the climate of the 1930s the acceptability of a wide response to what some would view as a domestic political or diplomatic crisis was further reinforced by the League of Nations. This body dedicated to the promotion of the peaceful resolutions of international disputes operated on the basis of collective security. That is that an attack on one member constituted an attack on all and this required a collective response. The Spanish Civil War is largely absent from much of the literature on the League of Nations. This is often explained in terms of the League being defunct from the mid 1930s onwards – that the League's

failure to halt the nationalist agenda of the Japanese in Manchuria and the Italians in Abyssinia earlier in the decade meant that by 1936 it had lost all credibility as an international arbitrator. Indeed, Stedman reminds us in his chapter that when Neville Chamberlain took office as Prime Minister in 1937, he believed that the League was now redundant as a diplomatic tool.

Yet despite the League's diminished reputation as an arbiter of international disputes, it did not prevent League-inspired collective initiatives being taken, especially by the British and French. But the fact that such bodies as the Anglo-French-inspired Non-Intervention Committee spectacularly failed in its task reflected the problems that had also beset the League. While many of the countries that took part in the conflict had similar agendas, for example the Italians and the Germans, none actively collaborated to form what could be described as a coherent, identifiable long-term strategy towards involvement in the war. This was also true of the democratic powers, especially Britain and France. Thus, as the chapters by Adamthwaite and Stone respectively demonstrate, the Spanish Civil War revealed that notions of diplomatic, let alone military alliances in Europe in 1936 were very tenuous indeed. There was little practical reality to an axis that was to be extended to Spain in due course, despite the rhetoric of Hitler and Mussolini. In contrast, Cassels suggests that there was a high level of collaboration between Hitler and Mussolini on a practical and strategic level, but concedes that much of this stemmed from mutual suspicion rather than from a sincere desire to work together or from a belief that collaboration was more likely to produce a fascist victory in Spain. The point about the general pragmatism and latent unilateralism that underpinned the attitude of the two dictators to the war in Spain is illustrated by Searle's point that it was a snap decision by Hitler to become involved in the war in Spain and not part of a considered long-term strategy. Still less was there a coherency or even a common agenda between the United States, Britain and France, the latter revealing much about the health of the Entente Cordiale that was such a mainstay of diplomatic exchanges between London and Paris throughout the interwar period, as the chapters by the present author and Keylor suggests.

The American Civil War does not, of course, provide the only example of western European interest in the outcome of a domestic conflict before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. In many respects, the intervention of the White armies in the Russian Civil War provides a more useful example not only of a more recent precedent for external intervention, but offers other insights into the shape and nature of international diplomacy in the two decades after the Second World War. The international

response to civil wars in the industrial and post-industrial era is a barometer of the general political, diplomatic and military priorities of the time in which the conflicts are fought. It is unlikely that intervention would have taken place on the scale that it did in both the Russian Civil War and the war in Spain had this been an era less interested in experimenting with new ideologies offering the prospect of a world that was better and fairer than that which had caused the First World War. Significantly, both conflicts also took place at the geographic periphery of Europe in two states that were considered to be more economically, socially and political backward than much of the remainder of Europe, especially western Europe. In part, both wars were about establishing the boundaries of industrial, and with that, of a capitalist Europe. As Carley in particular suggests, the two wars also reflected the wider European fear of a general ideological war, with the prospect at an attempt at a bolshevik revolution in Europe using Spain as its western European base. The civil wars also reflected the lack of confidence among the victorious powers at the end of the First World War both in the new democratic order they sought to create in Europe and, more significantly, of their ability to defend it. And with that, the lack of consensus among them about how best to achieve their peace aims.

Another feature of the democratic alliance that emerged victorious in 1918 was that it was not a partnership of equals. One of the reasons for the tension in interwar diplomacy was because the British, French and American governments were reluctant to accept this point and the realities associated with it. One of the issues that bound the British and French together so tenuously through the Entente Cordiale was a mutual resentment at the unwillingness of the United States, the most powerful economic power in the world, to take a pro-active role in the enforcement of the peace treaties at the end of the First World War. The response of the German and Italian governments to the Spanish Civil War also demonstrated that the Axis was not a partnership of equals and that, as Stone suggests, that it would never be extended to include Franco should he emerge victorious. My chapter suggests that the 'hierarchical' nature of the Axis alliance was not lost on British commentators on the origins and course of the war. Cecil certainly thought that the British government should not adopt the same policy towards Mussolini and Hitler, that the Duce would be more amenable to diplomatic persuasion than his German counterpart.

The idea that Franco's Spain should be, at best, a junior partner in the Rome-Berlin Axis, later extended to include the Japanese in the Pact of Steel, is referred to in a number of chapters. Hitler and Mussolini believed

that the wider European war would be, when it came, a struggle against bolshevism and not against democracy and bolshevism combined. However, it is striking to examine the reasons offered for Franco being viewed in this way. Franco's lack of interest in European diplomacy has been well chronicled, but it is difficult to explain why it was that the youngest General in Europe since Napoleon should have been viewed as backward in his ability to formulate military strategy by the German and Italian dictators. Hitler and Mussolini were, as Stone and Searle demonstrate, exasperated by Franco's reluctance to use nerve gas and to adopt an attritional style of warfare instead of the lightning attack favoured especially by the Germany army. Yet within this picture of Franco as an exponent of a defunct peculiarly Spanish military strategy painted by Stone, Searle also suggests that Hitler was sufficiently concerned about curbing any expansionist aims that Franco might have had outside Spain to be willing to send many of his military elite to fight in the conflict. So this begs the question: did Hitler and Mussolini view Franco as an ally or a potential challenger to their agendas? As it was, he proved to be neither.

The emphasis of this discussion so far has been on areas of common ground that the Spanish Civil War had with other civil conflicts in the industrial era, especially the Russian Civil War. However, one aspect that does set the war in Spain apart from its Russian counterpart is, as Cassel's suggests, that none of the participants in the former viewed it as an opportunity to wage a war of conquest. In many respects the Russian war had to be of this kind because of the nature of the objective, to bring about regime change and thus snuff out bolshevism. This suggests a passion for a commitment to the cause that was not evident in the same way or to the same degree during the war in Spain. Among the combatants, it was the powers representing the extreme right and left of the political spectrum that behaved like 'conventional' combatants in a war providing direct military and economic assistance to the cause they supported. In contrast, the democratic powers waged the war by proxy, clinging to the principles of non-intervention even when it became apparent that no other powers were doing so. The attitude of the British, French and American governments towards helping shore up the ailing Spanish Second Republic was radically less pro-active than it had been during the Russian Civil War. The Allies participated in the Russian Civil War during the final year of the First World War and during the early years of peace when the British and French particularly were exhausted in terms of war resources and manpower. Yet, despite the effects of the Great Depression and the reluctance especially of the British parliament to sanction of coherent plan

of rearmament, no such constraints applied to the British and French in 1936. By that year, the United States' economy, thanks to Roosevelt's New Deal, was emerging from recession rapidly and was thus in a position to offer potential support to an initiative by the democratic powers to protect democracy in Spain. So why did the British and French stand back? The isolationism of the Americans was undoubtedly a factor, as Cassels noted.

But more importantly, in 1936 and indeed for the duration of the war in Spain, the stakes were too high for the British and French to offer direct intervention. There was their actual or perceived lack of preparedness for the war itself combined with the belief that the war might escalate into a wider European conflict. Furthermore, antagonising Franco by intervening in the war on the side of the democratic government in Spain would also undermine the British government's wider agenda of appeasement of the fascist dictators. As Cassels and Neville argue, appeasing Hitler was more important to the British than seeking rapprochements with Mussolini and later Franco.

Lastly, the main reason why none of the powers involved in the Spanish Civil War viewed it as an opportunity to wage a war of conquest was that it was not in the interests of any of them to do so. The security of Gibraltar meant that it was in the interests of the British to be on good terms with the Spanish government, whatever its ideological identity, but it was a calculated gamble that if Franco won the war, then a diplomatic rapprochement could be reached after that event. This is what occurred and it was much less expensive than mounting, with the French, an invasion of Spain to drive out Franco's Nationalists. Both countries also remembered how politically and diplomatically contentious the period of occupation of Germany after the First World War had been. And, as the Anglo-American coalition that have been fighting the Taliban and Al Qaida have found in more recent years, there are the difficulties surrounding the maintenance of security after the war is over and calculating when to withdraw the forces of occupation. In the case of the French, while France shared a frontier with Spain that could have come under threat by a Spanish nationalist regime bent on waging a war of aggression, this was not a major part of French military strategic planning, as Adamthwaite argues. As far as the French were concerned, it was Germany and not Spain that posed the greatest threat to their security and from that to the remainder of Europe. The chapter by the present author in this volume argues that it was the failure of the British and French government to co-ordinate their policy towards how to preserve democracy in Spain was a significant factor in sealing the fate of the Second Republic.

One of the dynamics of 1930s European diplomacy that these chapters reveal is the creation of informal spheres of influence, providing further indication that the 'new diplomacy' heralded by the League of Nations after the First World War was, indeed either defunct by 1936 or had been severely undermined. For their effectiveness, they depended for the most part on the collaboration between two countries: Britain and France (with occasional involvement from the United States); Italy and Germany; and most controversially of all, the Soviet Union and France, as Carley demonstrates. The areas of Europe in which these partnerships were most effective were in negotiations concerning Germany and Italy, the German conquest of Austria and Czechoslovakia and in interpreting German diplomatic intentions respectively. Mussolini's willingness to gain diplomatic capital from Anglo-French concerns about Germany was well established by 1936 as both powers had courted the Duce during the days of the Stresa Front during the previous two years. However, when the German *Anschluss* with Austria rendered the Stresa Front obsolete, Mussolini had no compunction about making public declarations that Italy would not impede the Führer's plans for the Sudetenland and the remainder of Czechoslovakia after 1938.

The establishment of the Mediterranean as an Italian sphere of influence after the Germano-Italian Gentleman's Agreement of January 1937, discussed by Cassels, also impacted widely not only on German attitudes towards the war in Spain but also of the democratic powers, especially Britain. The military dominance of Italy in the Mediterranean during the Spanish Civil War was reflected in the fact that Italian intervention in the war was greater than that from Germany. However, as both Searle and Cassels indicate, the Italians were less successful than the Germans in taking on board the tactical lessons the war in Spain taught, especially regarding the deployment of tanks. While Cassels argues that Mussolini's claim to be able to dominate the northern shore of the Mediterranean stemmed partly from inflated perceptions of his army's capabilities brought about by their collaboration with the Germans.

Within this book, with the notable exception of Searle's chapter, little attention has generally been paid to the role of the international brigades in the Spanish Civil War.⁵ This is for two reasons. Firstly, there is already a huge literature on this subject which has been the subject to recent detailed historical scrutiny which brings little need for repetition here. Second, and more importantly, this book is primarily concerned with the international high political, diplomatic and military response to the Spanish Civil War which has, as already described above, been relatively neglected in recent years, especially in the light of historians' undiminished interest in the

wider origins of the Second World War, which tends to place comparatively little focus on the events in Spain.

All history books seek to answer questions and, in so doing, suggest new avenues of enquiry for future scholars. This book is no exception. It does not claim to offer an exhaustive study of every dimension of the immensely complex international context of the Spanish Civil War. However, it is the first book to sketch out the political, military and ideological parameters of the main debate from which further work can be undertaken. We need to know, as this introduction has already suggested, more about the way in which the successor states in Eastern Europe viewed the conflict, especially those with governments which by the late 1930s had paramilitary or fascist sympathies. We also know comparatively little about how Britain and France justified their policy towards the Spanish war to their colonial possessions and, indeed, how those colonies viewed the conflict. The attitude of American diplomats towards Europe's descent into war during the 1930s is also an area that remains relatively under-examined by diplomatic historians in the last twenty years. All of these issues, and many others, remain for other scholars to examine. It is important that this work is carried out if the international context of the Spanish Civil War is to emerge further from the long shadow cast by the massive historiography on the origins of the Second World War.

Gaynor Johnson,
Salford, January 2009

Notes

¹ S. Orwell and I. Angus (eds), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, 1 (London, 1968), p. 308.

² The most recent study of note is C. Leitz and J. Dunthorne (eds), *Spain in an International Context* (Oxford, 1997).

³ The most relevant literature is discussed fully in the context of the chapters of the book, but one of the best received books published to mark the anniversary is A. Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: the Spanish Civil War, 1939-1939* (London, 2007).

⁴ See D. Reynolds, *Summits: Six Meetings that Shaped the Twentieth Century* (London, 2007), chapter 2.

⁵ See for example most recently R. Baxell, *British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War: The British Battalion in the International Brigades, 1936-9* (London, 2007).

CHAPTER ONE

THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR REVISITED: THE FRENCH CONNECTION¹

ANTHONY ADAMTHWAITE

No civil war in the twentieth century divided Europe as deeply as did the Spanish conflict. It defined choices for a generation, grabbing world as well as European headlines. Spain represented for veteran Marxist Eric Hobsbawm “the quintessential expression” of a global confrontation between fascism and democracy.² The international brigades drew volunteers from over fifty countries. Over two thousand Americans joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.³ The war’s shadow extended well into the second half of the century. Savage repression of Republican veterans and political suspects persisted into the 1950s and the Franco dictatorship only finally ended in 1975. At the close of the Second World War, demands, especially from France, for the imposition of United Nations sanctions on the Franco regime rekindled international passions.⁴ Not only did the experience of fighting in Spain help define post-1945 European Socialist and Communist leaders like Italian Communist leader Palmiro Togliatti and West German Chancellor Willy Brandt its memory played a major role in the construction of state identity in Communist Europe.⁵ All the more astonishing therefore that the war seems to be slipping off the radar screen-barely noticed in some recent histories.⁶

Unsurprisingly no consensus exists on the international and domestic significance of the war. Was it, as many perceived at the time, the chief ideological battleground in a European civil war? What impact, if any, did it have on the coming of the Second World War? Over seventy years on this chapter reassesses two central features of the conflict: its relationship to the coming of the Second World War, in particular the notion of Spain as the principal ideological battlefield in a European civil war; secondly, France’s role in the internationalisation of the conflict. According to the

standard version, French leaders bore a double responsibility. Immediate help in July might have defeated the military rising. But *Front Populaire* premier Leon Blum reneged on his initial promise to send arms because it threatened to open up too much risks- international war, break-up of the *Front Populaire*, British opposition, and civil war in France. Instead Blum and foreign minister Yvon Delbos proposed a non-intervention agreement to be monitored by an international committee of the powers. This turned into a tragicomedy because Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union rapidly expanded their involvement, and France adopted “relaxed non-intervention”. Need it have been so? The question historians have not asked is whether non-intervention might have been made to work. This chapter argues that France, by not making compliance a *sine qua non* of its non-intervention initiative in August 1936, in effect encouraged the great powers to intervene at will and contributed to the collapse of the Second Republic. Enforcement would almost certainly have saved the Republic and prevented the coming of general war in Europe.

A European civil war?

The American historian J.H. Hexter once observed that historians could be divided into lumpers and splitters. The lumpers have certainly left their mark on debates about twentieth century Europe. The years 1914-1945 are often described as a thirty years war, and the period 1919-1939 as a European civil war. How the past is sliced up, sorted and labelled obviously influences how it is read. Certainly the perception of an ideological civil war raging across the length and breadth of the continent was common enough at the time. “To very many people who lived through the years of the 1930s”, wrote British historian Donald Cameron Watt, “what seemed to be in train was not the approach of another war between states, but the preliminary stages of a civil war between the forces of oligarchy, aristocracy, authoritarianism, fascism and those of popular democracy, socialism, revolution”.⁷ The rise of paramilitary leagues, imbued with a goal of revolution, wielding violence against opponents had produced by the mid-1930s in most countries of Europe a dissolution of the normal social and political process into civil disorder or civil strife. Militarisation as a result of the First World War, it is alleged, dissolved the idea of a common European society, engendering violence and political extremism.

On closer inspection concepts of a thirty years war and a European civil war are not as illuminating as they might at first appear. As well as being overly deterministic the thirty years war notion does not fit the

evidence of renewal and open-endedness in international relations so persuasively highlighted in Zara Steiner's magisterial study of the 1920s.⁸ As for the idea of European civil war, by 1922 the Russian, Finnish and Irish civil wars had ended; Mussolini and Hitler both came to power without large-scale violence. It is not true that by the mid-1930s most European countries faced the threat of civil dissolution or disorder. French right-wingers clashing with police in the Stavisky riots of 6 February 1934 and street battles in London's East End between Mosleyites and Communists did not make a revolution. As a percentage of Europe's population the forty thousand or so who volunteered to fight for the Spanish Republic were quite miniscule.

What is remarkable is just how much stability the two major democracies enjoyed through the interwar years, as did Scandinavian and Benelux countries and large swathes of independent Eastern Europe. The danger of civil war in France was more apparent than real. Did the ideological paroxysms over Spain in 1936 indicate a risk of civil war?

"Before any foreign war", Blum wrote to his wife in 1942, "France would have had civil war, with precious little chance of victory for the Republic".⁹ At the time, however, Blum did not voice his fear publicly. Nor did diplomatic observers signal any concern about the risk. While some of the governing elite may have feared civil war there is no evidence that it posed a significant danger. Notwithstanding a lot of shouting and marching society possessed considerable resilience. Only two serious episodes disturbed the peace-the Stavisky riots and the Clichy incident in March 1937 when police fire killed six demonstrators. To be sure, as Orwell's train to Irun steamed through the French countryside peasants working in the fields turned and gave the anti-Fascist salute but as a gesture of solidarity, not a call to revolution.¹⁰ In the Czech crisis of September 1938 when opinion fiercely debated the pros and cons of defending France's ally the Daladier government calmly mobilised a million reservists without protest or incident. Admittedly some of the French officer corps favoured Franco and castigated Republicans as "Reds" but since the Dreyfus Affair at the turn of the century the army had studiously avoided intervention in politics. There is no evidence of military plots against the regime and no reason to think that the general staff would have entered the fray.¹¹

Diversity and complexity are the dominant features of interwar Europe. The neat binary categorisations of democrats versus fascists projected by contemporary propaganda are misleading. There were not two Spains in 1936-39 but at least four: Republicans, Nationalists, and the third Spain-eloquently described by Paul Preston- of those who wanted to mediate,

and others like Salvador de Madriaga who opted out of the conflict.¹² To these might be added a fourth Spain of reluctant conscripts, the “forest people” of Javier Cercas’s *Soldados de Salamina* (2001) who arranged informal truces and fraternisations and who deserted as quickly as possible.¹³ Spain’s neutrality in the war of 1914-18 shielded it from mainstream European tensions. Whatever the influence of wider European concerns Spain’s peculiarities-peripheral nationalism, anarchism, the land problem, the weakness of the state, the role of the military and the effects of colonial warfare in Morocco- weighed most in the breakdown that led to civil war.

“Much ado about nothing”? The Spanish War and the coming of the Second World War in Europe

What effect did the fighting have on the outbreak of the war of 1939? The literature offers widely different views on this question. Three interpretations stand out: the civil war while not a direct cause of war in 1939 was nonetheless of pivotal importance; the military rising of July 1936 marked the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe; thirdly the Spanish conflict represented primarily a domestic affair without a significant international impact.¹⁴ At first glance the second reading sounds plausible. The story goes that after the liberation of France in 1944 General de Gaulle inspected *Maquis* forces in Toulouse, stopping before one raggedly dressed man, he asked, “And when did you join the Resistance my friend?” Back came the answer: “Well before you, General”. He had fought in Spain from 1936. When Free French forces rolled into Paris in August 1944 tanks manned by Spanish veterans carried battle reminders- Guadalajara, Teruel, Madrid and Ebro. Moreover some prime movers at the time considered 1936 the pivotal moment in the coming of a European war. “We are already in a state of mobilization and at war, the only difference is that there is no shooting yet”, announced Field Marshal Hermann Göring in 1936. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt talked of “a reign of terror and international lawlessness”.¹⁵

In point of fact the war of 1939 was not a continuation of 1936. Not only did major players change positions - Mussolini stayed neutral until June 1940, Stalin was Hitler’s ally until June 1941- chronology made a decisive difference. The final months of peace between Franco’s victory of March 1939 and the German invasion of Poland in September proved conclusive for the opening of the European phase of global war. The military rising of July 1936 did not act as a wake-up call for the western democracies. On the contrary, apprehensive that the civil war would

trigger an international conflagration British and French leaders rushed to isolate Spain and conciliate Hitler and Mussolini. If conciliation had continued into the summer of 1939 a general war would not have occurred - Poland, like Czechoslovakia, would have fallen to German aggression. Coups and alarms in the spring of 1939 brought disengagement from appeasement – Hitler's occupation of Prague in mid- March, rumours of an imminent attack on Poland, the Italian invasion of Albania in early April, and apprehensions of a German strike against Western Europe. Nevertheless in September 1939 British and French governments declared war against Germany with extreme reluctance. They finally did so in order to ward off a perceived threat to their position as independent great powers. An instinct for self-preservation recognised that further toleration of German expansion in eastern Europe jeopardised the security of western Europe. But general war was not an inevitable consequence of Hitler's aggression. The forging of an Anglo-Franco-Soviet military alliance in the summer of 1939 would have forced Hitler to reconsider his designs on Poland. Soviet neutrality was a prerequisite for a successful invasion of Poland.

How then did the Spanish conflict influence the coming of war in 1939? It did so in various ways. Firstly, and most obviously, Spain exemplified for a post -1918 generation the brutality and destructiveness of modern war. The fact that the war lasted much longer than expected, coupled with the demonstration of the destructive potential of air power in the bombing of Guernica and other towns, spurred the democracies to redouble efforts to avoid general war. Another world war, it seemed, would be one of attrition like the Great War. All the more reason therefore to buy time for rearmament and postpone or avoid fighting. The destruction of Spanish cities seemed to confirm predictions that the bomber would always get through, feeding vastly exaggerated fears that Paris and London would be raised to the ground in the first days of hostilities. These anxieties were exploited by those who argued for peace at any price in the Munich crisis of 1938. The reinforcement of appeasement played into the hands of Hitler and Mussolini, strengthening perceptions of Britain and France as clapped out imperial powers that would not lift a finger in defence of Austria, Czechoslovakia or Poland. Thus the pusillanimous Franco-British response to German, Italian and Soviet intervention fuelled the expansionist designs of the Fascist states, making general war much more likely.

Spain's connection with German foreign policy objectives in the autumn of 1937 is spelt out in the Hossbach memorandum summarising the Führer's secret meeting with his advisors on 5 November 1937. Hitler

sketched possible opportunities for German expansion in central Europe, including war between France and another state, arising out of Mediterranean tensions. Clearly he had in mind a Franco-Italian war over Spain, viewing it as:

coming definitely nearer...and he was resolved to take advantage of it even as early as 1938...To the foreign minister's objection that an Anglo-French-Italian conflict was not yet within such a measurable distance as the Fuhrer seemed to assume, the Fuhrer put the summer of 1938 as the date which seemed to him possible for this...Colonel General Goring thought that, in view of the Fuhrer's statement we should consider liquidating our military undertakings in Spain. The Fuhrer agrees to this with the limitation that he thinks he should reserve a decision for the proper moment.¹⁶

In the event, an Anglo-Franco-Italian war over Spain did not materialise, and Hitler annexed Austria and the Sudetenland in 1938 without firing a shot. What part did Spain play in Hitler's success? For one thing, the conflagration diverted attention from central Europe. The European left believed that Spain was the battle that mattered. The cry most frequently heard in foreign affairs debates in the British Parliament was "Arms for Spain". For another, the example of Spain strengthened the decision to appease Hitler in central and Eastern Europe. Fear of a Spanish-type civil war between Czechs, Slovaks, Sudeten Germans and other ethnic minorities motivated in part the decision of President Edvard Benes of Czechoslovakia to surrender to Anglo-French and German pressure in September 1938. Moreover, the Italo-German commitment to Franco, together with Stalin's aid to the Republic, gave Spain the appearance of a proxy war between fascists and democrats, provoking fears in London and Paris of a Europe divided into two armed camps—precisely the scenario British and French ministers wanted to avoid because it suggested a re-run of 1914. Consequently they refused to take sides, playing down the importance of ideologies and seeking to tempt Germany with offers of colonial and economic co-operation.

Any residual faith in the League of Nations and collective security that survived the Italo-Abyssinian war of 1935-6 was swept away by the exclusion of the League from the Spanish war. Simultaneously Spain reconfigured great power alignments. Stalin's intervention deepened Anglo-French suspicions that he wanted to provoke general war in Western Europe. As a result, London and Paris put safety first and kept the Soviet Union at a distance—cutting Stalin out of the Munich Pact of September 1938. This cold-shouldering, combined with the futility of the London Non-Intervention Committee, convinced Stalin of the bankruptcy

of collective security and the likelihood that the democracies would settle with the fascist dictators at the expense of the Soviet Union. Engagement in Spain brought Führer and Duce - initially wary of each other - into a formal understanding in the Rome-Berlin Axis of November 1936. In 1934-35 such a partnership had seemed unlikely. Similarly, Franco-British cooperation over non-intervention consolidated a dependency mindset among French politicians making it harder to escape “the English governess”.¹⁷

Above all, Spain cranked up a climate of war. In this sense there is continuity between the civil war and the European conflagration. The international crises of the 1930s like their pre-1914 predecessors had a cumulative effect. An effect became a cause, reinforcing the original cause. The Sino-Japanese war that began in July 1937 without a Japanese declaration of war deepened the sense of impending doom created by the rush of events. As a result, democratic leaders leaned over backwards to stave off disaster. By spring 1939 the realisation that Germany might have to be stopped by war produced warnings but too late to convince Hitler. Commentators in 1934 speculated about the “next war”; by the autumn of 1936 international war no longer appeared a possibility but an overwhelming probability. “The present state of affairs in reality was no longer peace but undeclared war”, signalled France’s ambassador in Berlin.¹⁸

The ineffectual attempts of London and Paris to isolate Spain and the concurrent downplaying of ideology highlight a fundamental aspect of international relations in the approach to 1939 – reluctance to project democratic values. “What is really and ultimately at issue in the world”, observed Sir Robert Vansittart, Permanent Under-Secretary at the British Foreign Office, “is dictatorship or democracy...I am not sure there will be a world war again, or a war at all if democracy will show plainly that it can and will look after itself”.¹⁹ Why did the democracies allow themselves to be outmanoeuvred by the dictatorships over Spain? Why did they not promote core values more vigorously? First and foremost the answer is appeasement. Well before the civil war erupted the search for a settlement with Germany drove Franco-British policy. After Hitler’s Rhineland coup demolished the Locarno Treaty, London and Paris strove through the summer and autumn for a replacement treaty. Appeasement by definition implies accommodation. The assumption was that the peace settlement of 1919 was bound to collapse. The tide of Fascist expansion could only be ridden, not reversed. Concessions had to be made for the sake of international peace. Leaders deluded themselves that ideological differences need not prevail. “I am a Marxist and a Jew”, avowed Blum to

German economics minister Hjalmar Schacht in August 1936, “but we cannot achieve anything if we treat ideological barriers as insurmountable”.²⁰

Anglo-French elites preferred to talk of cultural diplomacy rather than propaganda because propaganda was something dictators did and attempting to imitate them might contradict the bid to minimise the ideological divide. Unsurprisingly, cultural diplomacy lacked the necessary bite for the ideological contest. British and French initiatives were under-resourced, badly co-coordinated, and ineffective. In 1938, France did not have foreign language broadcasts and the radio talks of premier Edouard Daladier were relayed in French only.

Another reason for the failure to sell values has to do with the democratic deficit -in practice Britain and France was far from democratic, especially in the making of foreign policy. In France women had to wait for the vote until 1944, and barely a handful of working class deputies sat in the Popular Front legislature elected in 1936. A narrowly recruited, well- to- do political class monopolised decision-making in London and Paris. It promoted consensus, not conflict. George Orwell in *Spilling the Spanish Beans* (1937) written after returning from Catalonia concluded, “there has been a deliberate conspiracy ...to prevent the Spanish situation from being understood”.²¹ Confirmation of his judgment came a year later when a senior BBC producer acknowledged in a confidential memorandum: “We have in fact taken part in a conspiracy of silence”.²² Spain attracted intense media coverage, especially in the new generation of news magazines led by *Picture Post*, *Paris Match*, and *Vu*. Ironically, their reporting tells us more about the preoccupations of British and French societies than of the realities of the conflict.²³ Official news management, together with self-censorship on the part of the BBC and newsreel companies, shaped the information available to the public. “There can be no doubt”, concludes one history, “that the newsreels helped to prevent the Spanish situation from being understood”.²⁴

France’s decision for non-intervention

In Javier Cercas’s best selling novel *Soldados de Salamina* the author’s desire to discover the truth about the story of Falange leader Rafael Sanchez Mazas’ escape from a Republican execution squad takes him to France in search of a veteran Republican fighter Miralles. The French connection is central to an understanding of the internationalisation of the war. Following the military rebellion of 18 July 1936 the *Frente popular* asked its sister coalition for help. After initially promising support Blum within a week reneged on his promise. At this early stage rapid delivery

of substantial military aid would almost certainly have deterred Hitler and Mussolini from assisting Franco. Fearful of torpedoing their own fragile Front *Populaire* French leaders focused instead on securing an international non-intervention agreement. That accord quickly became a death warrant. While substantial Axis help gave Franco a decisive advantage, the spasmodic trickle of French and Soviet supplies amounted to slow strangulation for the Republic. Although historians have closely scrutinised the origins of non-intervention the question of enforcement has not been addressed. The French documents offer no clues as to whether ministers and officials discussed the issue. This chapter argues that the effective policing of non-intervention could have saved the Second Republic.

The war mattered for the French more than for any other European state. Spain filled the front pages of the Parisian and regional press for days at a time. The largest national contingent to the International Brigades- about 10,000 (26%) came from France. It would be hard to exaggerate Spain's impact on France's grand strategy. The resulting anxieties go a long way towards explaining the retreats from central Europe in 1938. A Franco victory had nightmarish implications for French security - a stranglehold by a Fascist triple alliance of Germany, Italy and Spain. As well as menacing the Pyrenees land frontier the war jeopardised air and sea links with France's North African empire. With a third of the army garrisoned in North Africa survival in war depended on the speed and safety with which troops could be transported across the Western Mediterranean.

Why then did France not come to the rescue of the Second Republic? The farce of non-intervention and Blum's formula of "relaxed non-intervention" asphyxiated the Republic. In a rare flash of humour Hitler's foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, called it the "Intervention" Agreement.²⁵ Blum's bid to salve his conscience and pacify critics within the coalition by adopting "relaxed non-intervention" brought no real relief because quantities were small and erratic. For long periods in 1937 and 1938 the land frontier was closed. At the time and well into the middle decades of last century the origins of non-intervention provoked bitter controversy. Did Blum by renegeing on his initial promise of arms betray the Spanish Popular Front? Then and later the European left alleged that British ministers bullied Blum into proposing non-intervention.

It's now possible to reach a more dispassionate assessment of France's predicament in July-August 1936. The dangers represented by domestic fissures overrode the external menace of a Spain governed by Franco allied to Germany and Italy. Spain sharpened the social strife generated

by the Great Depression, semi-fascist leagues, and the rise of the Popular Front. One serious casualty was the failure of Blum's efforts in 1936-7 to secure an effective Franco-Soviet military alliance. Stalin's intervention in Spain stiffened the antipathy of the French general staff and the extreme right for the Soviet Union. The perceived threats represented by Blum's Popular Front and "Red" Spain dissolved the right's traditional Germanophobia. Blum, not Hitler, became public enemy Number One.

A consensus of sorts on the origins of non-intervention has emerged. British pressure, it is agreed, certainly weighed on French decision-making in July-August 1936; uppermost however were two considerations: apprehensions of a general war, the desire to save the Popular Front alliance.²⁶ That said, the full story of French decision-making will never be told. Since Third Republic cabinets did not keep minutes of their discussions the available evidence is dominated by tendentious memoirs and exculpatory testimonies to the post-1945 parliamentary commission of enquiry set up to investigate the events of 1936-1944.²⁷ Disappointingly, Blum's private papers shed little light on decision-making. The best snapshot of the frenetic, overheated atmosphere in Paris comes from Socialist ex-minister Fernando de los Rios, premier Jose Giral's special envoy in Paris. It's a picture of policy made on the hoof by huddles of ministers struggling to deliberate in the midst of a deafening outcry over arms for Spain:

When Blum went this morning to see the President of the Republic he found him perturbed and in such a state of mind that he said:

'What is being planned, this delivery of armaments to Spain may mean war or revolution in France...the Cabinet is divided in its views...From half- past two until a quarter to four I have been with the Prime Minister and another Minister...' 'My soul is torn', said Blum who is as convinced as we are of the European significance of the struggle that is being in Spain.²⁸

The literature on the origins of non-intervention tends to overlook crucial points. The key to official attitudes before and during the conflict was the prioritising of appeasement at home and abroad. In this context Blum's initially positive response to prime minister Jose Giral's request for help assumed that the rising, like most *pronunciamentos*, would be old history in a week or two at most. Since Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union had not yet furnished aid the premier believed that France was the sole great power involved. Particularly crucial was the lack of secrecy. Astonishingly, Giral's telegram of 19 July requesting arms was sent *en clair*. To make matters worse Madrid's ambassador in Paris and members

of his staff sympathised with the military rebels and leaked information to the press. The resulting war of words forced the Blum cabinet to deliberate in the worst possible conditions. If Giral had employed a secret emissary, bypassing the embassy, the political storm might have been postponed and perhaps contained. At the least politicians would have gained a breathing space.

The dynamics of appeasement explain the *Front Populaire*'s response to the civil war. Publicly Blum claimed that sending arms would have set Europe on fire. "Do you not think", he rhetorically asked French Socialists at Luna Park on 6 September 1936, "that we have, after all, saved Europe from war at a particularly critical moment?"²⁹ To make sense of the premier's attitude France's external and internal policies have to be understood as a whole. The success of Popular Front reforms and economic recovery depended on the defusing of domestic and international conflict. Without domestic solidarity France would not have a credible international presence. An international settlement with Germany, preferably with American participation, it was believed, would energise domestic political and economic recovery. "Chancellor Hitler had more than once expressed his desire for an agreement with France"; Blum declared to the French Senate on 23 June 1936, "We have no intention of doubting the word of a veteran who for four years experienced the misery of the trenches".³⁰

Rene Girault suggested that the threat of general war posed by Spain propelled France, Britain and the United States into launching a grand strategy for a wide-ranging economic and political settlement. In other words bribing Hitler with financial credits and participation in colonial development, a kind of Euro-Africa.³¹ The Tripartite Financial Agreement of 25 September 1936 was intended as a first instalment of the new Franco-Anglo-American partnership. Although the extent of Anglo-American commitment to the project is problematic, France's enthusiasm is not in doubt. On 23 December 1936 foreign minister Delbos outlined the shape of this wider arrangement. A settlement for the Spanish war, he told the German ambassador, would provide a basis for a Franco-German pact. Germany "should have raw materials, colonies, and loans, in return for which the only compensation required was peace". "Being a farmer's son", said Delbos, "he could speak for almost the entire French people in conveying the honest desire to reach-now or never-an understanding".³²

It might be argued that if appeasement mattered so much, why did Blum at first promise help to Spain and then announce in September 1936 the nation's largest rearmament program since 1918? The September program was not intended as an alternative to appeasement but as

necessary leverage for negotiating an international settlement. The nation's war machine was out of date and urgently needed upgrading. The premier's first response to Jose Giral on 20 July came from the heart and assumed a short-lived *pronunciamento*. No other great powers had yet intervened and sending arms seemed relatively risk-free. However as battle lines between left and right hardened by the hour Blum after consulting colleagues quickly realised that intervention jeopardised the governing coalition and the primary goal of domestic and international stabilisation. The president of the Republic, the presidents of the Chambers, and the foreign minister all impressed on him the menace of a general conflagration. One minister, a married man who had lost three brothers in the war of 1914-18, told Delbos, a life-long bachelor: "They should never appoint bachelors to key positions. They should appoint fathers of families like myself, I tell you I will not go to war under any circumstances".³³ With the industrial unrest of May-June subsiding and the flight of capital slowing down the rationale for staying out of the conflict proved overwhelming. Vacillation and back-peddalling in the last days of July peaked in the proposal for a non-intervention agreement on 1st August.

Need the story have ended in the pantomime of the London non-intervention committee? A proposal for enforcement linked to the non-intervention initiative could have rescued Madrid while simultaneously promoting a European settlement. What kind of enforcement? All supplies to Spain came by sea or overland across the Pyrenees. With Anglo-French naval power ascendant in the Atlantic and Mediterranean and France controlling the land frontier a joint naval blockade would have stopped Axis and Soviet supplies. Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin did not have the will or capability to unleash a general war in 1936. The success of the Nyon Conference of September 1937 in establishing joint naval patrols to stop Italian attacks on ships trading with Republican Spain demonstrates that Franco-British policing could have worked very effectively. In 1937, the Italians called off their attacks as soon as the conference met without waiting for the naval patrols. The difficulty of course would have been to persuade the British to get on board. Although the Nationalists enjoyed some sympathy in London, French ministers held a master card if they had possessed the will to play it. The future of both states as independent powers depended on their keeping in step. Britain's security relied on the French army denying Germany control of the Channel coast. A threat by France to go her own way might have brought the British in tow.

Why did Paris make no attempt to give teeth to its proposals? Reasons are not hard to find. Part of the answer clearly has to do with leadership

and the constraints of the Popular Front. Blum was no Clemenceau. He lacked the killer instinct required for decisive leadership. Yet the Third Republic and *Front Populaire* had no tolerance for strong leaders- as anchorman of a shaky coalition Blum had to play safe and go with the mainstream. Talking tough to London would have alienated colleagues. Old habits die hard- deferring to the British governess had become almost a knee-jerk response. It offered a security umbrella and cast-iron alibi. Perfidious Albion could be blamed for unpopular choices and retreats. Moreover, as the hullabaloo over arms for Spain reached a crescendo in the space of a few days ministers were driven from pillar to post desperately seeking a quick fix. There was no time for quiet reflection. A tortured Blum could neither eat nor sleep. Given the Third Republic's primitive machinery of government advisors could not be relied on to come up with new ideas. In any case commitment to appeasement made a tussle with London undesirable. The last thing desired was any kind of confrontation with Germany and Italy.

All these circumstances are telling. But the fact that ministers do not seem at any point to have considered enforcement suggests another reading. The adoption of "relaxed non-intervention" later in the year is usually interpreted as a response to the escalation of Axis help and continuing left-wing criticism of Blum's policy. However it is possible to suggest that once Blum realised he could not keep his original promise of aid he prepared the way for undercover intervention. Since he could not help Spain directly he would do so indirectly. In this sense he got what he wanted – a leaky statement of intent that easily accommodated "relaxed non-intervention". But it was a bad bargain. Given the political constraints, there was no way France could match or surpass Axis aid. Insistence on policing would have offered a better deal for everyone because in saving the Spanish Republic it would have helped stabilise the domestic and international situation. By contrast, "relaxed non-intervention" energised Fascist and Nazi expansionism and helped kill the Spanish republic.

To conclude, France was the prime agent in the internationalisation of the Spanish Civil War. In July 1936 the *Front Populaire* had two choices: to send arms or insist on strict observance of non-intervention by all major powers. Sending arms would in all likelihood have proved decisive in crushing the uprising but it was not in the circumstances a realistic option. The collapse of the *Front Populaire* would have strengthened the French right and introduced a risk of civil war. And by sending arms France would have isolated itself diplomatically. By contrast, non-intervention with teeth offered the prospect of a united Franco-British front, which would have satisfied the mass of French voters and almost certainly

deterred the dictators. Non-enforcement turned out to be a death warrant for the Spanish Republic.

France's loss was Germany's gain. Of the powers Germany gained most from intervention, a military laboratory for testing new weapons, iron ore for rearmament, the diversion of attention from central Europe, and the strengthening of the alignment with Italy. As a consequence, France's strategic situation deteriorated. The French general staff supported non-intervention because they did not wish to alienate their preferred alliance partner Italy. However Italy allied with Germany and Franco-Italian relations went from bad to worse. At a meeting of the permanent committee of national defence on 3 November 1937 minister of war Edouard Daladier explained that defence planning hitherto based on the likelihood of a Franco-German conflict had now to plan for a world conflict in which the Mediterranean would be the main war theatre. By February 1939 France and Italy appeared poised for conflict in North Africa.

Did the defeat of the Republic matter? At the time of the war's fiftieth anniversary in 1986 some commentators gave a negative answer. A Republican victory, it was said, would have made it easier for Hitler in 1940 to push through to Gibraltar and so close the Mediterranean to Britain. Such a scenario is grossly misleading because it blandly assumes that a Republican victory would have made no difference to the coming of war in 1939. More plausibly, it can be argued that the defeat of Franco would have forced Hitler and Mussolini to review their foreign policy goals. And Franco's fall would have encouraged Britain, France and Czechoslovakia to stand up to Hitler before it was too late. In short a Republican victory could have radically reconfigured international politics, making Europe safe for democracy.

Eric Hobsbawm concluded that the war "now seems to belong to a prehistoric past, even in Spain".³⁴ Quite the contrary: the war in fact is very much today's war. Its leading features- ideology, volunteers, air power, atrocities and high civilian casualties- pointed to the new face of twentieth and twenty first century warfare. Spain illustrated the symbiotic relationship between war and the rise of centralised state power, a relationship confirmed by the war on terrorism after 9/11. Thus the civil war exposed the central evil of modern war. In Nietzsche's words, "he who fights too long against dragons becomes a dragon himself".³⁵