

# The Spanish Civil War—A Wound Unhealed

*The Wound in the Heart: America and the Spanish Civil War* by Allen Guttman. The Free Press of Glencoe. \$5.95.

by Richard Gilman

When Hugh Thomas's *The Spanish Civil War* was published last year it filled a wide and astonishing gap in historical scholarship, since it was the first full-length study, and very probably the first dispassionate account in any language, of that sanguinary and prototypical conflict. With Allen Guttman's *The Wound in the Heart*, whose subtitle is "America and the Spanish Civil War," another expectant space has been filled. For Guttman's book is the first attempt to measure and understand the complex and inordinately violent response in America to what many regarded then, and continue to regard, as the "last great Cause."

"A most passionate war," Thomas called it, and Albert Camus wrote that it was felt by himself and many others as a "personal tragedy." That these things were true is what gives justification to Guttman's rather purple-sounding title: the Spanish Civil War was indeed a wound of a deep moral and psychic kind, and one, moreover, which has not yet been healed. That it was superseded and rendered imaginatively microscopic by the enormity of the second World War, which began less than six months after the fall of Barcelona, remains an objective fact. But there is another sort of fact to pit against that.

The passions that were aroused at the time by Franco's insurrection and the subsequent defense of the Republic, the commitments that were made then, the values that were proclaimed, hypostat-

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ized and brought into the most bitter irreconcilability with other values—all this has been preserved as though untouched by what came afterward. Men who cared about the Spanish Civil War when it was fought have not ceased caring, and few have come to care in a new way. The war remains for them the central political fact of the 30's and the event which most stringently defines their sense of contemporary hope and disaster, their relationship to the tides of history.

Mr. Guttman, who is an assistant professor of English and of American studies at Amherst, is not a partisan of this kind; like Hugh Thomas, he is too young to remember the Spanish War. He does, nevertheless, take sides, so that while his documentation and analysis of the period is scrupulously fair his sympathies are in evidence throughout, and they are with the Loyalists. And this is because, on a deeper level, they are with what he calls the ideal of "liberal democracy," which he employs in this valuable study as his chief intellectual and investigative tool.

When he began his work, he writes, he was immediately confronted by the currently widely held notion that the Spanish Civil War was a Communist Cause. A good part of his effort from then on was devoted to disproving this contention, at the same time as he sought to discover what kind of cause the event actually was. And he makes a convincing case for his findings. "The extraordinarily passionate concern that great numbers of Americans felt for the fate of the Spanish Republic," he writes, "was not—for the most part—the result of a movement toward radicalism. It was one more manifestation of the liberal tradition in America."

It was of course true that radicalism entered into the American

response to Spain, and Guttman devotes a good deal of space to a descriptive analysis of attitudes and behavior on the extreme Left. The Communists, and the various Marxist parties who were at least as strongly anti-Stalin as they were anti-Franco—especially as the Republic came more and more under Russian influence—saw the war as supremely a class struggle.

But the Communists, shrewder and less principled than their Marxist rivals, understood that for most Americans the war in Spain threatened liberal democratic values and was comprehensible chiefly in terms of our own traditions. Communist poets and novelists and publications like the *New Masses* therefore wrote about Spain as though Teruel were Valley Forge, invoking over and over again the spirits of Lafayette, Tom Paine and Thomas Jefferson and not those of Marx, Engels or Lenin.

So widespread was this acceptance of the Republic as a full-fledged or at least nascent democracy imperiled by the forces of totalitarian reaction—an acceptance Professor Guttman shares, although with major reservations; the Republic, he points out, was a highly volatile, unstable and sickly organism—that it led to some unforeseen alignments among Americans.

For the most part, the economic royalists failed to line up behind Franco; the financial press, for example, which would have been expected to support him, did not do so, and with one or two exceptions the news magazines and the mass circulation journals were active partisans of the Republic. Again, public-opinion polls showed that businessmen and professionals were actually more sympathetic to the Loyalists than were skilled and unskilled workers or the unemployed.

Beyond the conviction that Spain's young democracy, so much like our own in its infancy, deserved to be protected against the lawless and brutal uprising, there was another strain in the American tradition which, Professor Guttman argues cogently, worked centrally to nourish a passionate adherence to the Republic. This was the myth of the "whole" or "natural" man, that child of Thoreau and Emerson and Whitman who never really existed but who had persisted in our national consciousness and our ideological aspiration.

For artists and writers, who were so prominent in the defense of the Republic (apart from the expatriate Ezra Pound, not a single American artist or literary figure of any stature was a Franco adherent) this humanistic myth was particularly compelling. Spain, after its throwing off in 1931 of the monarchy ("feudalism" was a key word in American indictments of the Spanish Right) and the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, its attempt then under the Republic to create a new society and its heartbreaking and eventually hopeless battle against abstract and mechanical power, represented to them the latest, perhaps the last, opportunity for Western man to recover his soul.

It was precisely the feeling that Franco incarnated the modern triumph of technology and abstraction over the living spirit that brought so many otherwise non-political men into the Loyalist camp. "The one thing that seized the public conscience, the liberal imagination," Guttman says, "was the aerial bombardment of cities." The bomber above the clouds was the purest symbol of dehumanization, the perfect nightmare, the absolute degradation; Americans who less than twenty years later were to take Hiroshima in stride found Guernica intolerable.

This feeling of natural life against mechanical death was most fully expressed in Ernest

Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. One of the sadly ironic points Guttman makes about this is that as the Loyalists fought on, men like Hemingway had perforce to accept the necessity of modern weapons; a few years later the R.A.F. and American tanks were to be the proudest boast of many of the liberals who had been appalled by the first Stukas in Spain.

There was, of course, a minority of Americans who supported Franco. It included a scattering of extreme conservatives motivated largely by economic considerations, but by far the greater part was composed of Catholics impelled, naturally enough, by religious commitments. Though polls indicated that some thirty per cent of American Catholics favored the Loyalists, the hierarchy and priesthood, almost all Catholic publications and the most vocal elements of the laity were solidly, even frantically, behind the Nationalist cause. And this Catholic adherence to Franco was responsible, Professor Guttman makes plain, for the most painful and lasting of the social wounds the war inflicted upon America.

Though his own sympathy is with the Republic, he gives the fairest of readings to the Catholic side, going beyond mere tolerance to an understanding of the agonized dilemma so many of them faced. The crux of the conflict was that support for Franco clashed centrally with belief in the ideals of liberal democracy, which Catholics of course shared with other Americans. It was true that the issue appeared excessively simple to prelates like Cardinal Hayes of New York, for whom the Republicans were "diabolical, blood-crazed enemies of God," and poets such as Boston's Father Leonard Feeney, who apostrophized the Caudillo in this manner: "O God, O Christ, O Franco!" But a great many Catholics were bitterly and helplessly troubled.

Professor Guttman finds the

most sorrowful aspect of the situation in the fact that such Catholics could find no official comfort and almost no means of expression. Among Catholic publications only *The Commonwealth*, whose shift during the War from a pro-Franco to a neutral but Loyalist-tinged position was the result of a violent internal upheaval and cost the magazine a third of its subscribers, and the *Catholic Worker* failed to give their support, usually stridently and often irrationally, to the Nationalists. That there was a segment of Republican advocacy that stemmed from Protestant pleasure in the discomfiture of Spanish Catholicism made the flames leap higher.

Guttman, for all his balanced and judicious approach to the Catholic position, doesn't carry his analysis of its implications far enough. After remarking that the Catholic response leads to the problem of "an authoritarian church in a pluralistic society," he never comes to grips with that. Similarly, his discussion of the Neutrality Act and the Embargo on arms shipments to Spain is less substantial than it might have been. After listing three factors in Roosevelt's decision to retain the Embargo—the influence of British policy on ours, the isolationism of many Americans, and pressure from the Catholic side—and after noting his agreement with Thomas that the Republicans would have thrown off Russian influence had they been armed by the democracies, he lets the matter drop.

Yet these are complex matters that are more properly, perhaps, the subjects for political and socio-religious analysis. For what he *has* done Professor Guttman deserves gratitude. Few events so circumscribed the most profound issues of our beleaguered century as the Spanish Civil War did. Our own response to it, then as now, tells us a great deal about what we are.

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