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"If You Tolerate This..."

The Spanish Civil War in the Age of Total War

campus

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Spain's Multiple Wars: Mobilization, Violence and Experiences of War, 1936–1939

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In 1998, an unusual song soared to the top of the British charts: The Welsh rock band *The Manic Street Preachers* sang about the Spanish Civil War almost 60 years after its end, projecting the struggle as an example of solidarity and heroism for a hopeless and depressing world. In their youth, the band's musicians had directly experienced the quashing and suppression of the miner's unions in Wales in their historic strike against the Thatcher government, and now held up in challenge to their own times a Republican propaganda slogan from the Spain of the 1930s: "And if you tolerate this, then your children will be next".[1] The song evoked the war's horrors, but also the ideals of anti-fascism and the "good fight" of the International Brigades, especially the volunteers from Great Britain. It showed in a striking way just how deep the continuing memory of the war in Spain was in the consciousness of the British left. The song also made clear how strong the abiding impact still is of the patterns of interpretation of the 1930s: for example, by framing the struggle of the Republic against the rebel generals as an anti-fascist liberation struggle, or by interpreting the war as a prelude to the great conflagration of the Second World War.

The title and refrain of the song quote a poster of the Republican Propaganda Ministry, meant to jolt the international public into outrage over the bombing of Madrid. Denouncing the air war against the civilian population as "the 'military' practice of the rebels", the poster shows the frail body of a small girl, victim of the bombing raids by Germans and Italians in the Madrid industrial suburb Getafe, beneath a sky swarming with bombers. Thus, the poster represents a double overstepping of boundaries: It refers to the first mass bombardment of a large European city from the air, a milestone in the history of modern air warfare. And it

1 The text of the song can be found on the following site: http://www.lyricsfreak.com/m/manic+street+preachers/if+you+tolerate+this+your+children+will+be+next_20087607.html, accessed on 1.4.2008.

also violates a strong taboo in the description of the consequences of military violence by providing a close-up image of a civilian victim, and even more so: the corpse of a child.[2]

Fig. 1: Poster of the Propaganda Ministry of the Spanish Republic, 1937

The slogan "And if you tolerate this…" is both a warning and a call, from the moment of horror to a call to mobilization, action and defense. In the Republican propaganda imagery associated with the bombing of Madrid in the fall and winter of 1936/37, this linking of shock and mobilization takes on an added dimension. Another poster of the Republic's Propaganda Ministry, showing a clearly agitated woman with a small boy beneath the silhouette of a bomber squadron and a towering, gaping ruin of a house, confronts the viewer with the question "What are you doing to prevent this?" (Fig. 1) The photo of mother and child included in the picture stems

2 See Caroline Brothers, *War and Photography. A Cultural History*, London/New York 1997, pp. 175–178; the press photo that served as a model for the poster is on p. 177. A reproduction of the poster from the collections of the Imperial War Museum London can be found online: http://www.artistquirk.com/if-you-tolerate-this-then-your-children-will-be-next-/, accessed on 1.4.2008.

from the funeral for the anarchist militia leader Buenaventura Durruti, killed in November 1936—the greatest mass demonstration in Barcelona during the Civil War. While the original photo stressed sorrow and rage,

Fig. 2: Here, the magazine *Volksillustrierte* (fomer: *AIZ*), published by the German Communist Party in exile, December 9, 1936. Special issue: "Kämpfer für den Frieden" ("Fighters for peace") is making use of the same photo as the poster. It shows the detail of a photograph of Buenaventura Durruti's funeral in Barcelona, November 22, 1936: a woman and a little boy with clenched fists, incorrectly localizing the scene in Madrid .

picturing the sobbing mother and a phalanx of angry raised fists of adults and children, the fist of the small boy did not appear in the poster. Here, mother and child appear as totally passive victims. By contrast, the photo of the funeral procession portrayed the mobilization of the society in face of the enemy—the mobilization of the entire people, encompassing adults and children, women and men. (Fig. 2)

From their respective perspectives, the posters of 1936/37 and the hit song by the *Manic Street Preachers* (1998) present the Spanish Civil War as a milestone in the employment of unbridled military force and its totalization in the 20th century, projecting it as a conflict of international dimensions and universal significance. They embody an interpretation of the Civil War in Spain that has its roots in the war itself, and still retains its attraction down to today. That reading can be found in popular culture and among groups and initiatives that identify with the tradition of anti-fascism, but it extends far beyond. It also shapes down to the present influential historiographical master narratives about the *Guerra Civil Española* and the 1930s in Europe. Eric J. Hobsbawm saw the war in Spain as the "quintessential expression" of the contemporaneous global conflict between democracy and social revolution on the one side, and the forces of reaction and counter-revolution on the other, which brought a "notoriously anomalous and self-contained country" at the periphery of Europe very directly into the center of history. Hobsbawm, one of the "survivors of the 30s", is, like the much younger *Manics*, a prominent representative of the interpretation of the struggle as a "good fight": "it remains the only political cause which, even in retrospect, appears as pure and compelling as it did in 1936"[3]. Aside from the question as to how one can understand and interpret the nexus Hobsbawm postulates between democracy and social revolution, this transposing reproduces the binary logic of the war years. And that logic also has an impact on the contrary side of the political spectrum, of course with an opposite political orientation, extending all the way to the revisionist neo-Francoist journalism of our own times.[4]

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3 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century*, London 1996, pp. 156–161, quotations, pp. 156, 160.

4 On neo-Francoist revisionism, associated in particular with Pío Moa and César Vidal, and his influence on academic scholarship, see Carlos José Márquez, *Cómo se ha escrito la Guerra Civil española*, Madrid 2006, pp. 201–303; Chris Ealham, "'Myths' and the Spanish Civil War: Some Old, Some Exploded, Some Clearly Borrowed and Some Almost 'Blue'", in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 42, no. 2/2007, pp. 365–376. On the persistence of the interpretative patterns established in the respective political camps, see