

THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE END OF THE CIVIL WAR

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January 1989 marks the 50th anniversary of the occupation of Catalonia by General Franco's troops, and therefore the 50th anniversary of the end of the Civil War in Catalonia. It was a war with some rather strange consequences. For forty years Franco's dictatorial regime evoked it every day, since his dictatorship was founded on his military victory. The regime drew its immense power from the thousands of people killed or taken prisoner. The strange thing is that almost the very next day after the General's death, the war was almost totally forgotten, to the extent that the new generations who have grown up in the last few years, under democracy, know nothing about it. We should perhaps find a happy medium, since though historic events should never be exaggerated, they should not be forgotten either, especially if we can draw conclusions from them like those that arise from the armed conflict of 1936-1939.

In part, the war was an anti-Catalan crusade. Although it was directed against the liberal democratic republican system, it was also a war against the working classes and against the nationalism of Catalonia and the Basque Country. The Spanish right wing's only response to the liberal and decentralizing trends was the use of military power, because it was unable in the thirties to come up with an ideology and a practice that met with the support of the majority of the population. The economic decline and profound, almost feudal, social injustices made it practically impossible to form a social block that was moderate yet open to the future; one that could offer a minimum of political stability. It is this reformist social block that has shaped all the European democracies, according to the peculiarities of each country. In Spain, the congenital debility of the ruling classes, coupled with the burden of a mentality that was rooted in ancestral mythologies, meant that the army was the only solid guarantee for the continuing social and ideological privileges of a minority. An alliance of landowners, military, high-ranking officials and clergy led to the start of the war as the only way to put to an end to a situation which, from their point of view, was becoming more and more unacceptable.

The situation in Catalonia was totally different. There was a bourgeoisie which was conservative but enterprising and accustomed to democracy. The role of the army and government officials had nothing to do with the society at large, and the clergy subscribed to Catalanist tendencies and was amongst the



most advanced in Europe at that time. There were also some social sectors that supported Franco but they were a minority. When Franco's army arrived in Catalonia, it described itself as an "army of occupation". It wasn't the republicans who spoke of an occupation; the fascists themselves considered they were occupying "enemy territory". The first time Franco's troops occupied Catalan territory was in

April 1938. They entered via Lleida, in the west. The very first thing the Franco government did was to repeal the Statute of Autonomy that the Catalan people had opted for democratically four years earlier. This political measure made it quite clear what could be expected from the new regime as far as Catalonia was concerned. The final attack on Catalonia took place in January 1939. On 15th January Tarragona, the southern capital, was occupied. On 26th of the same month Barcelona fell. On 10th February Franco's troops reached the French border and raised the new state's flag. The occupation of Catalonia was a walkover. There was no real resistance, even in Barcelona, the second biggest city in Spain. It was the prelude to the end of the war. That January, that defeat, was an indication of the situation in Catalonia: total destruction, not only in its economy, but also morally. There was nothing and no-one to provide even a glimmer of hope. Political and trade union leaders of all tendencies were either dead or had gone into exile or been put in prison. The intellectuals, many of them amongst the most important in Europe, were in the same situation. The civilian society and the social fabric it had built up over more than forty years disappeared. January 1939 saw a society totally dismantled. There was a profound break in the continuity of Catalan society, to the extent that the moment has a clear before and afterwards to it. A whole system and its codes of relations disappeared and was replaced by a new one, in which Catalonia's national identity was not only cast aside, it was fiercely persecuted and punished in a way that today seems grotesque. January 1939 was an attempt at national genocide based on cultural genocide, and the long years of the Franco dictatorship made it partly possible. After Franco's death, there was a spectacular revival of Catalan feeling, but even so there are still many sectors who are not yet convinced of the long-term danger that, in spite of the new, more favourable political situation, this attempted genocide could be revived. January 1939 was not only a military victory and defeat. It was a lot more.