The British Image of Spain and the Civil War

Enrique Moradiellos

Abstract
This article aims to examine those images of Spain and Spaniards which were dominant in Great Britain during the Spanish Civil War, 1936–39. Its basic conclusion is that these images corresponded to two large sets of stereotypes bequeathed by history (the Black Legend of the sixteenth century and Romantic Myth of the nineteenth century) and were used as appropriate by both supporters of the Republic and of Franco in their respective propaganda battles.

It has become something of a commonplace to say that the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39 had a tremendous impact on British public opinion and British political life in the late 1930s. This idea had in fact already been conveyed to General Franco by the Duke of Alba, his unofficial agent in London, during the course of the conflict: ‘Our war has become the most passionate and dividing issue among politicians and public opinion in Great Britain’.1 Twenty-five years later, the first academic study on the subject rightly reaffirmed the accuracy of that judgement: ‘Probably not since the French Revolution had a “foreign event” so bitterly divided the British people’.2 And very recently, the latest and most comprehensive analysis of Britain and the Spanish Civil War opened its pages with these words:

The British have not always been as greatly moved by other people’s wars as they were by the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, of all the foreign conflicts of the twentieth century in which Britain was not directly involved, the war in Spain made by far the greatest impact on British political, social, and cultural life.3

While unanimity on this question is overwhelming among academics, there is no similar level of agreement as regards the basic reasons and causes for such a phenomenon. I would suggest that the effect of the Spanish Civil War on British political and social life derives from two different but interconnected factors: 1) the presence of a clear analogy between the pre-war crisis in Spain and the general European (and British) crisis during the so-called ‘inter-war period’ (1919–39); and 2) the existence of a chronological parallel between the course of the Spanish War and the course of the Continental crisis which preceded the onset of the Second World War in 1939.4 As regards the first factor, the struggle in Spain between the Reformist and Revolutionary forces fighting for the Republic and an insurgent army of reactionary persuasion seemed to reduplicate on a smaller scale the increasing triangular tension in Europe between the Western democracies (France and Britain), with or without the support of the Soviet Union, and the Axis of Fascist powers (Germany and Italy). As regards the second factor, the timing of the outbreak...
of the struggle in Spain was of particular importance, occurring parallel to and
in close connection with the final descent of Europe into World War Two.

As a result of the combination of both these factors, to contemporary
witnesses (and to present observers as well) the war in Spain seemed to be not
just a minor civil war on Spanish soil but also a sort of dress rehearsal for the
forthcoming continental war. And the coexistence of both factors had two
basic consequences for the Spanish Civil War:

1 It gave rise to a passionate interest in European public opinion, whatever
one’s sympathies for one or other of the Spanish contenders, an interest
which did not preclude subtle differences of interpretation regarding the
character of the conflict: for those who were in favour of the Republican
cause it was a crucial battle between Democracy and Fascism; and for those
who supported General Franco’s war effort, it was a face-to-face struggle
between Communism and Western civilization.

2 It gave rise to a sudden process of internationalization of the conflict
deriving from the intervention (or non-intervention) of foreign powers on
behalf of one or another of the Spanish contenders. That is to say: Fascist
Italy and Nazi Germany came to the aid of General Franco’s insurgent
army from the very beginning, the Soviet Union came to the support of the
Republican Government three months later, and France and Great Britain
preserved their neutrality and were followed in this by the rest of the
European powers under the umbrella of the collective Non-Intervention
Agreement signed in August 1936. As a result Spain became for two and
half years ‘the cockpit of Europe’ (in the words of a British diplomat).5

By early August 1936, a leading editorial in the conservative newspaper The
Times encapsulated quite precisely the analogical character of the Spanish
crisis: ‘It [the war in Spain] may be regarded as a distorting mirror in which
Europe can see an exaggerated reflection of her own divisions’6. In fact, this
use of the metaphor of Spain as a mirror of Europe was very frequent during
that period in Great Britain and in the Continent in general. As a literary
formula, it tried to stress that the fighting taking place in the Spanish arena
was a distant but recognizable conflict for the social groups, political
ideologies and great powers trying to impose their will on a divided Europe.
Such was the impression conveyed by Rex Warner in his poem entitled ‘The
Tourist Looks at Spain’:

In Spain the veil is torn.
In Spain is Europe. England also is in Spain.
There the sea recedes and there the mirror is no longer blurred.7

In the case of Great Britain, the interpretation of the Spanish Civil War as a sort
of distant and distorting mirror of a divided Europe was integrated with and
filtered through a perception of Spain and Spaniards which was deeply
ingrained in popular and official circles. In fact, the understanding of the
Spanish struggle in general public opinion and among the political leadership
of the country was articulated around stereotypes and generalizing
conceptions formed over history regarding Spain and the national character of her inhabitants. In particular, I will try to show that the historical stereotypes at work in the 1930s fell into two basic trends which were the essential framework for understanding the Spanish.

The first trend was the negative one derived from the ‘Black Legend’ built up during the period of imperial and religious antagonism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to this Spanish character was defined, basically, by three attributes: Cruelty (as in the Conquest of America), Bigotry (as during the Inquisition) and Vanity (as in the aristocratic hidalgo whose popular name, Diego, could have been the origin of the term of abuse ‘Dago’).

The second trend was the positive one derived from the ‘Romantic Myth’ developed since the beginning of the nineteenth century as a result of the common struggle of both Britain and Spain against Napoleonic France. Under this new paradigm, the three attributes of the Spaniards were Bravery (for example, the guerrilla fighters), Pride (as during the siege of Saragossa) and Individualism (as epitomized by Don Quixote).

The contrasting images derived from both historical sets of stereotypes, whatever their flagrant contradictions, became the essential filter and glass through which the Spanish Civil War was perceived and understood in Great Britain. Indeed, they had been around for many years before, with different degrees of positive or negative elements in their final mix depending on the source or author. But we could agree that Richard Cobden’s mixed description of the Spaniards in 1847 was still quite typical of the general and common view in Britain by the time of the 1930s:

They are a peculiar people not understood by us. They have one characteristic which their whole history might have revealed to us, i.e., their inveterate repugnance to all foreign influences and their unconquerable resistance to foreign control ... They are a proud people ...

They forget their own ignorance, poverty and political degradation.

It goes without saying that the onset of the civil war in Spain, with its components of violence, cruelty, bravery and heroism all together, reactivated stereotypes from both trends simultaneously and with full force. A brief review of some significant quotations could provide some kind of impressionistic evidence for this judgement. For example, a few days after the beginning of the conflict in mid-July 1936, a popular London newspaper, The Evening Standard, published an article on the question which combined elements of the Black Legend and the Romantic Myth to explain what seemed to be a ‘peculiarly’ Spanish event:

It is a mistake to suppose that the Spanish counter-revolution is a Fascist revolution. It is not. It is an army revolution. It is the kind of revolution that has occurred in Spain and in South America over and over again. It is just a military coup d’état ... There may be a prolonged period of civil war attended by an even greater cruelty than has characterised similar Spanish civil wars in the past.

We should not assume that this vision was just an example of simplistic media
language resting exclusively on black and white clichés inherited from history. It was also used in the articulate and confidential level of political and official circles. By November 1938, when General Franco’s forces were about to start the final offensive against Republican Catalonia which would lead to total victory, Major Edmond Mahony, British Military Attaché in Spain, sent a report on the military situation back to the War Office which included the following words:

The Spaniard is not a man susceptible to reason, nor does he value wisdom where its counsels lie athwart his instincts. Being entirely the servant of his emotions he can be counted upon in the present circumstances to prolong his resistance to the utmost limit of human endurance ... Civil war is in the National tradition, like the bull fight it pays a nice dividend in emotional excitement, and the prospect of its continuing indefinitely probably causes less dismay in the ranks and in Spain generally than outside it.  

Three final and clear examples of this pervasive reading show the tendency to understand the war as a sort of recurrence of ‘old Spanish customs’ alien to British character and culture. By November 1936, the Consul-General in Barcelona, Norman King, wrote a long report on ‘atrocities in Spain’ for the Foreign Office which ended as follows: ‘the Spaniards are – for the most part – still a race of blood-thirsty savages, with a thin veneer [of culture] in times of peace’. A month later, the Secretary to the Cabinet felt obliged to note the following sentence expressed by a minister in an official meeting of the Cabinet: ‘it was suggested that the state of affairs in Spain was likely to remain unsettled for a long time ... Conditions were more analogous to South or Central America than to Europe’. Shortly after, following a short visit to the rearguard in Francoist Spain as war correspondent, the journalist Randolph Churchill, only son of the Tory MP and future Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill, stated in private in mid-1937: ‘A few excitable Catholics and ardent Socialists [in Britain] think that this war matters, but for the general public it’s just a lot of bloody dagoes killing each other’.

Many more examples could be offered, but the conclusion can be stated without reasonable doubt by now: the Spanish Civil War reinforced the traditional perceptions of Spain in Britain and seemed to prove the peculiar national character of the Spaniards (whether this was positive, according to the Romantic Myth, or negative, as per the Black Legend). Let me quote here a leading editorial from the London Evening Standard on 30 July 1936: ‘Spain is a law unto herself and parallels with other countries, however interesting, are misleading’.

But this is not the only important point when considering the image of Spain in the United Kingdom during the conflict of 1936–39. I would like to suggest that, apart from this general phenomenon, there was a fundamental rearrangement of images and perceptions as the war set in and the process of internationalization demanded an active response by the British Government and public opinion to the new diplomatic and military crisis. Such a rearrangement of images was the result of the respective preferences or sympathies in favour of the Republican Government’s cause or in favour of...

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16 It is important to remember that a dual image of Spain was already present among Spaniards under the formula of 'official Spain' and 'real Spain' (or 'Old' Spain and 'New' Spain) since the last

the insurgent Army's war effort. In other words: the negative traits of the Black Legend and the positive traits of the Romantic Myth were applied to one or another of the Spanish contenders according to the political preferences of the speaker. The prior existence of two contradictory sets of stereotypes clearly facilitated this division of black and white attributes between both sides of the conflict: a manichean division formulated, by the way, in a manner quite similar and reminiscent to the traditional division in Spain between a 'legal' country and a 'real' country, an 'Old' Spain and a 'New' Spain.  

The first signs of such a division of attributes between both Spanish parties could be perceived in the first Parliamentary debate in the House of Commons on the subject of the Spanish Civil War, which took place on the last day of July 1936. Speaking on behalf of the Labour Party, Philip Noel-Baker expressed his opinion that the Spanish Republican Government led 'by President Azaña, a Liberal and great statesman', 'is [fighting] for the cause of parliamentary democracy' against 'militarist rebels'. As a consequence, Noel-Baker stated the basic lines of Labour policy towards the Spanish Civil War until the end of the conflict:

We urge [the British Government] above all to use their influence to prevent other Powers from intervening on the side of the militarist dictators ... We urge them to give to the Spanish Government every facility which the practice of international law allows.

The sharp reply from the Conservative benches came from Mr. Wise, who duly rejected 'the angelic liberal and democratic qualities of one of the most savage Governments, except the Russian, that has ever been seen in Europe'. But instead of advocating British support for the enemies of such a Government, Mr. Wise, in a purely pragmatic way, advocated a line of policy which the British Government was already practising long before the European Non-Intervention Agreement came into force:

I suggest that the best thing that we can do is to preserve that neutrality which any responsible Government would wish to preserve in similar circumstances.

The identification of Republican Spain with the positive images associated with the Romantic Myth was a process well in place by the end of 1936, once the Civil War was transformed into a long war due to the successful resistance of Madrid to Francoist frontal assault. It seems quite clear that such an identification rested upon two basic pillars: 1) the political organisations which defended the Republic consistently in Britain during the course of the conflict (basically, the Labour Movement, the British Communist Party, the Liberal Party and very small sections of the Conservative Party such as the Duchess of Atholl); 2) the intellectual and artistic circles of anti-fascist persuasion, who came to consider the survival of the Spanish Republic as 'the Last Great Cause'.

A clear example of political support for the Republic for its 'progressive' stance against the dead weight of the past could be the first public declaration
on the Spanish Civil War by the National Council of Labour in 1936. Under the heading ‘The Truth about Spain’, the document reads:

The conflict in Spain is not a Communist revolution. It is not a fight between ‘religious’ and ‘anti-religious’ sections of the Spanish people. The Spanish workers are fighting against monarchists, Fascists, and corrupt Clericals, who are striving to overthrow the democratically elected constitutional Government of the Spanish Republic by force of arms. The rebels have been obtaining munitions and other supplies from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy ... The new Government was no sooner elected than the Militarists and Fascists, refusing to accept the democratic verdict of the people, began to plot an armed rising. They were determined to prevent the Government from bringing justice, order and improved conditions to a country where military reaction, social injustice and economic misery prevailed.20

An even clearer defence of the Republican cause on account of its opposition to the Spain of the Black Legend was a speech in the House of Commons in October 1937 by John McGovern. Being a member of the Independent Labour Party and himself a Catholic, McGovern was very keen to challenge the view that the Republic was hostile to the Catholic religion:

For some time people have said that this was a war between religion and Communism, but they forget that years ago people were suffering under the Inquisition in Spain ... People who say that there is terror and cruelty in Spain should remember that Spain has been gradually emerging from the cruelty, terror and torture of the past.21

As regards intellectual circles, I would say that the best example of this type of support for the Republic was offered by the young poet Stephen Spender in mid-1937. Replying to a survey on the views of British writers on the Civil War, Spender cleverly contrasted the negative clichés of the Black Legend with the positive ones of the Romantic Myth:

I am opposed to Franco firstly because Franco and his supporters represent the attempt of the aristocracy and clergy of Spain to prevent the history of Spain developing beyond the Middle Ages ... and I support in Spain exactly such a movement of liberal and liberating nationalism as the English liberals supported in many countries still groaning under feudalism in the nineteenth century.22

The results of this survey were particularly interesting because it showed quite clearly that a large majority of British intellectuals were clearly in favour of the Republic: 127 of those who answered the questionnaire were ‘For the Government’, 16 were ‘Neutral’ and only 5 were ‘Against the Government’. This was a situation which was in strict accordance with general preferences among British public opinion on the subject. By October 1938 a poll conducted by the British Public Opinion Institute showed that 58 per cent of those quarter of the nineteenth century. Cf. Vicente Cacho Vio, ‘La imagen de las dos Españas’, Revista de Occidente, no. 60, Madrid, 1986, pp. 49–77.


18 Parliamentary Debates. House of Commons, 31 July 1936, cols. 1917–18. The real meaning and cause of such an ‘impartial’ policy was revealed by David Margesson, Conservative Chief Whip, to the Italian representative in London on 29 July 1936: ‘Our interests, our desire is that the [military] revolution should triumph and Communism be crushed, but on the other hand, we do not wish to emerge from our neutrality. The Cabinet would like to escape by the way of a general declaration of neutrality. This is the only possible way of counteracting labour agitation’. Quoted in E. Moradielles, La perfidia de Albión. El gobierno británico y la guerra civil española, Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1996, p. 60.


questioned were in favour of the Republic, 8 per cent supported Franco and 34 per cent offered no opinion.\(^{23}\)

In fact, public support for General Franco's cause in Great Britain was small in quantity but quite vocal and influential in quality. It was orchestrated into two basic groups: a political one (basically formed by conservatives of strong anti-Communist persuasion and with open access to official circles) and a religious one (mainly based upon the Catholic community and certain sectors of the Protestant churches). For both of them, in a curious reversal of clichés, Franco's Spain was the embodiment of the Romantic Myth in its life or death struggle against the Black Legend incarnated by Republican Spain.

The sort of hard conservative reaction to the Spanish crisis is clearly shown in the first report on the subject published by the London daily The Morning Post on 20 July 1936:

"Attack, swift and apparently highly organised, has been launched over the weekend on Spain's Marxist Government. The rising, which is definitely anti-Communist in character, has been led by the Army, and in spite of official denials and a strict censorship, it appears to have met with a considerable measure of success ... The movement is not Monarchist, but anti-Communist and is the sequel to the entire lack of administrative ability and the failure to keep public order on the part of the present Government.\(^{24}\)"

The clearest identification of each Spanish contender with the images of Black Spain and Romantic Spain was offered by Anthony Crossly, Conservative MP and Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, who travelled to Nationalist Spain in December 1936. After his return to Britain he declared in public:

"It does seem to me both petulant and misguided to challenge the bona fides of those people who are fighting for their religion against atheism, for the right to hold property against compulsory impoverishment, for a military dictatorship against a Communist dictatorship, for their country against Internationalism.\(^{25}\)"

In a similar vein, Captain Victor Cazalet, Conservative MP, resorted to historical reasons to defend the justice of General Franco's cause and British interest in his total victory. Speaking at a public meeting in March 1938, he tried to reverse the lack of popular sympathy towards Franco on historical grounds:

"Many things are said about General Franco and the cause for which he is fighting. Perhaps that is not surprising in a Civil War. But what is surprising is that so many English people, who should know better, have been easily deceived and prejudiced in this matter. (...)"

One word as to foreign domination. Such an idea betokens a complete misunderstanding and ignorance of Spanish history and Spanish character. General Franco is a true Spaniard in this respect, and never will bargain away one square mile of the soil of Spain. (...)"

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He is the antithesis of the ordinary conception of a dictator – courteous, quiet, gentle, with fixed principles and unshakable faith in the cause he is leading. For years he has been beloved by the soldiers under him for the care and devotion he has shown towards their interests. He typifies all that is best in the Spanish character and history, and truly represents in himself those ideas of liberty and justice for which today he and his army are fighting – a man, if I may say so, worthy to lead a great people to better and happier times. The more we learn and know about General Franco, his cause and the conditions that prevail in his area, the more convinced we become that a victory for General Franco will not only be a victory in the best interests of Spain, but also in the best interests of the peace and prosperity of Europe as well.26

The Catholic view of the Spanish conflict was clearly stated by the Archbishop of Southwark, Peter Amigo, who wrote to a letter to The Times on 5 September 1936. There he affirmed:

It is difficult for many in this country to realize the present situation in Spain. Ever since the Republic was started there has been a movement against religion, which need not have been ... The election of February 1936 brought about a still greater change. A weak Government took charge, but churches were burnt and people were murdered, yet few or none were punished. The Communists and the Anarchists became the masters and the Government was powerless. Last July ... the military, under General Franco, Mola, and other patriotic generals rose up to prevent what they considered the total destruction of their country ... Those who are called here ‘rebels’ and ‘insurgents’ are fighting for God and their country. It will be terrible if the ‘Reds’ obtain victory. Their triumph in Spain would lead to troubles in other countries, and perhaps to a worldwide conflagration.27

Professor Edgar Allison Peers, a Catholic expert on Spain from the University of Liverpool, enthusiastically took part in the propaganda on behalf of General Franco in order to counter the popular ideas as regards the character of Insurgent Spain. In the preface and the conclusion of his book Our Debt to Spain, published in 1938, he stressed:

If the phrase be taken in its broadest sense, the Civil War at present raging in Spain is to a very large extent a ‘war of religion’. The Nationalists are fighting, not for a return to a Spain of the Black Legend, but certainly for a regime which they believe will combine all that is best in the traditions of the old Spain with genuinely progressive (as opposed to anarchic and revolutionary) ideas – for the birth, in short, of a new Spain that will be worthy of the old. Their opponents, on the other hand, desire to cut loose entirely from traditionalism, and, in those parts of the country where they still retain power, the traditional attitude to religion, marriage and morality (to take only these three examples) no longer obtains ... In the event of a Nationalist victory, we know quite well what to expect ... Should the Communists gain power, the recent history of Russia will supply the...
What, then, do we see in this struggle? Nothing but bloodshed, defeat and conquest, the sordid and repulsive details of war? Surely much more than that ... Surely the crusade of a Christian people against the attempt to subject them to a godless rule, to take from them the treasures they most valued and to force them to bow down to deities whom they will never serve. A crusade, no doubt, which, like the mediaeval crusades, has its shortcomings, imperfections and excesses; but a crusade, nevertheless, inspired by the same idealism, courage and loyalty as can be found in the old-time Spanish pioneers, whether of material or of spiritual adventure.\textsuperscript{28}

The widespread support of the Catholic circles for General Franco was very important for two basic reasons. On the one hand, it offered a compact and coherent counterbalance to the popular movement of solidarity with the Spanish Republic, reinforcing the non-intervention policy of the British Government and its pro-Franco effects. As the Duke of Alba wrote at the end of the war: ‘Thanks to the Catholic press we could preserve in England a movement of sympathy towards General Franco which has been so useful to the British Government’.\textsuperscript{29} On the other hand, Catholic support to Franco helped to prevent a stronger line of action on the part of the Labour Movement for fear of further alienating the large section of Catholic working-class members in their ranks.\textsuperscript{30}

In any case, I would suggest that the contrast of images about Spain between Left and Right in Great Britain during the Civil War was unable to alter a basic idea which was firmly rooted in popular and educated circles: that the bloody conflict was the result of a peculiar historical development and national character, quite distinct from the British ones if not totally opposite to them. The mental framework sustaining this conception of the ever-lasting ‘Spanish peculiarity’ could be traced back to the Duke of Wellington’s dispatches during the so-called Peninsular War (1808–14), to Richard Ford’s \textit{Handbook for Travellers in Spain} (1845) or to Richard Cobden’s statement quoted earlier. The final result was a sort of general acceptance of the judgement advanced by the \textit{Evening Standard} right at the beginning of the conflict: ‘Spain is a law unto herself and parallels with other countries, however interesting, are misleading’. That was exactly the same line of argument used by Sir Winston Churchill in replying to Noel-Baker’s demands for support for the Spanish Republic, making impossible a common front on the subject between Labour and those Conservatives prepared to confront Nazism in Europe: ‘it is a Spanish quarrel which has been boiling up for a long time’.\textsuperscript{31}

In my opinion, without due regard to this widespread conception it is impossible to understand the strong support in Great Britain for the policy of non-intervention in Spain during the Civil War. The Conservative Government knew it and preserved such a policy as the best way to harmonize its formal respect for Republican legitimacy and its inner preference for a Franco victory. The Labour opposition reluctantly recognized the fact and tried to find a way to keep in line with public opinion while showing its solidarity with the Republican cause in humanitarian ways. Whatever the passionate sympathy for or hostility to one or another of the Spanish contenders (and there is no doubt about the level of passion aroused by the war), general public opinion in
Great Britain was never inclined to intervene officially and directly in that 'peculiar' and foreign conflict with arms, munitions, men and the consequent loss of life. Spain did not become a *casus belli* for the United Kingdom. The question remains as to what would have happened if the Spanish conflict had remained active beyond September 1939, when the era of splendid isolation was about to end abruptly. After all, Danzig was a much less emotional topic as a *casus belli* for the British public. But that is a very different story.
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