

The Lost Children of the Spanish Civil War

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Intro

According to the vast majority of historians and researchers the Spanish Civil War is a significant antecedent to the beginning of World War II. The focus is often on the deteriorating economic, political, and social development of the Spanish society caused by this cruel fight. However, there is one unexplored factor that affected a specific part of the Spanish society; I am referring to the children who lived during the bloody Spanish Civil War.

Firstly, this paper will concentrate on the children who became orphans due to arranged evacuations to other European countries such as Russia and England. Secondly, to discuss the strong effect the war and the post war period had on the children of that generation and the crucial impact in Spain as a whole in the years following the war.

These children left behind their parents and were forced to experience frightening situations that led to them prematurely becoming adults and having to support themselves physically and emotionally. These issues deserve to be examined closely since they are among the most controversial subjects arising from the Spanish Civil War.

The children who lived during the Spanish Civil War were known as 'Basque Refugees', even when they were from different parts of the country. Some of them were able to return to Spain after the civil war ended where they reunited with their parents or relatives, if they were still alive, however, that was not the case for the children who were sent to the Soviet Union.

The communist regime did not allow the Spanish children to leave the country. The lives of those who stayed in Russia were as bad as they were in Spain during the bombing of towns and even during the evacuations from war zones to refugee camps.

They were temporarily placed in orphanages and were transferred from one to another, depending on the situation of the Soviet Union during World War II, thus suffering the effects of yet another war. Some foreign observers such as Curzio Malaparte, an Italian journalist, wrote the following experience in his personal diary,

“In February 1942 during the Siege of Leningrad I found myself attached to General Edqvist, the commander of a division of Finnish troops stationed near Lake Ladoga. One morning he asked me to pay a visit. –We have just taken 18 Spanish prisoners, he said. - Spanish? I said. Now you are at war with Spain? –I don’t know anything about that, he said. But I have 18 prisoners who speak Spanish and claim they are Spanish, not Russian. Very strange. We have to interrogate them. Of course, you speak Spanish. –No, actually I don’t. –Well, you are Italian, so you are more Spanish than I am. Go interrogate them-I did as I was told. I found the prisoners under guard in barracks. I asked whether they were Russians or Spanish. I spoke in Italian, slowly, and they answer in Spanish, slowly, and we understood each other perfectly. –We are soldiers in the Soviet army, but we are Spanish. –One of them went on to say that they were orphans of the Spanish Civil War; their parents have been killed in the bombardments and reprisals. One day they were all put on board a Soviet ship in Barcelona and sent to Russia, where they were fed and clothed, where they learned a trade, and where they eventually became soldiers in the Red Army. –But we are Spanish. –In fact, I remembered reading at the time that the Russians had evacuated thousands of children to the USSR to save them from the bombardments and famine of the Spanish Civil War.” (32-34)

This is just an example of how the children of the Spanish Civil war who were shipped to Russia never returned to Spain and were compelled to join the Soviet Union army at a very young age.

The general consensus in Spanish society concerning this particular circumstance is that these children were robbed of a normal childhood, having no families or caretakers to watch over them. As a direct result of the challenges brought to them by these two wars, they were not able to grow into normal, functioning adults, therefore not being able to integrate into society.

A similar case in terms of sanitation and lifestyle concerns is the children sent to refugee camps in England. However, it must be noted that these children were not forced to join the English Army and eventually were allowed to return to Spain. Most of them were sent to a refugee camp called, Stoneham, in the city of Southampton. It is estimated that in 1937 about 4,000 evacuees arrived, including some teachers and priests.

The living conditions of these children and volunteers in the shelter were narrated by Richard Taylor, a senior medical officer of the camp. The following is an excerpt from his article Typhoid fever in the Basque Refugee Camp published in 1937 in *The British Medical Journal*:

By May 24 (1937) over 4,000 children between the ages of 5 and 14 had arrived at North Stoneham Camp. They had lived for some months in Bilbao and surrounding villages, many of them in bomb-proof shelters and cellars, with contaminated water to drink and very little food...Including the English staff it was estimated that 5,000 human beings were crowded into one large field. The care of such a large number of alimentary tracts under these conditions constituted an emergency public health problem of the highest importance...This proved to be a difficult problem. War conditions had affected the hygienic habits of the children, who deposited faeces and urine everywhere. The latrines were provided with narrow trenches, which were disinfected several times daily with chloride of lime. Hedges and ditches were treated in similar fashion and burnt out. Garbage was collected and burnt in incinerators (760).

While there is no doubt that in the majority of the refugee camps in England those children were provided with the best treatment possible, there is undeniable evidence to suggest that the sanitation, food, and life in general were far from acceptable. We must add to this poor life conditions the loneliness, sadness, and suffering that the separation from their loved ones brought to the children of the Spanish Civil War. In the majority of these cases the adjustment to a new culture and language was burdensome and disturbing.

Angela Giral, former director of the Avery Library at Columbia University, is one of those children who were evacuated. She has made a remarkable contribution trying to reach out to all of the children who endured the tragedy of being exiled. Angela, among other children of the Spanish Civil War, has organized what is called the *Children's Drawing of the Spanish Civil War*.

This is a collection of drawings produced by the children evacuated, especially between 1936 and 1939, to other parts of the country or Europe where they recall specific events at the time the evacuations took place. She shares her personal experience and the reasons she feels connected to these lost children:

I had the good fortune of being evacuated by my family and taken to my grandparents in Algiers. Barely three years old at the time. What I remember from later years is stories about my grandfather's obsession with trying to make me laugh. I was a perennially sad child. Some of these children never saw their parents again, others went back to Spain at the end of the war, some went into exile, like myself, and grew up in far away lands (n.pag)

But today one of the questions that thousands of Spanish families are asking themselves is: Were these children indeed sent to refugee camps or were they kidnapped by Franco's forces and given to the military or aristocratic families? Alasdair Fotheringham, a British journalist has investigated this subject and concluded that, "In Franco's early years, 'child-stealing' by the Spanish state was politically motivated" (n.pag).

He provides evidence to support this well founded suspicion by sharing the following case that took place at the Saturraran Women's Prison in the Basque country. In that prison Julia Manzanal, one of the

inmates, was a personal witness of this illegal adoption, “I never let my child out of sight because when mothers were condemned (to death), they would rip their babies out of their arms.

They would give them to priests, to military families, to illegal adoption rings and educate them in their own ideology” (n.pag). Fotheringham states that, “As late as 1949, official documents of the ruling Falange party give detailed instructions on how children born to their former enemies then exiled outside Spain were to be kidnapped and brought back across the border for re-education. Their names were then changed to ensure no further contact was possible” (n.pag).

According to Fotheringham the most common question that the parents of missing children asked themselves and the Spanish authorities during the years of the civil war was if their children died or were kidnapped.

The passage of time did not change the fact that Franco’s dictatorial regime resulted in the extermination of thousands of Spaniard families and contributed to the rapid growth of the illegal adoption trade. In the process, many children lost not only their biological families, but also their own identity. Of course it is essential to observe that exile was not the only cause that led to ‘the lost children of the Spanish Civil War’.

The great economic depression that immediately followed the war had a profound impact on families and especially on children. The Spanish literature also reflects the effects of the extreme poverty on children caused by the Spanish Civil War, mainly loneliness and social alienation.

Ana María Matute, born in Barcelona, is one of the various Spanish writers who was scarred for life by the civil war. Matute narrates her story from the perspective of a child who is dealing with the mental and physical consequences of the war. Her novels focus on her own traumatic childhood memories, recalling details and experiences she herself lived through during the postwar period.

Her entire work focuses on the loss of innocence and the struggles that a very young generation suffered by the actions of the dictator Francisco Franco. The lack of emotional and financial support from families left those children unable to overcome isolation and ended up separating themselves from society.

The war also left countless children on the streets of Spain without the guidance of their parents or in many cases, even close relatives. In her short story Fausto, Matute combines both the consequences of hunger and isolation in a nameless girl of about nine years of age.

The fact that the girl has no name indicates that ‘she’ could be one of the thousands of unknown children who wander in the streets of Spain. She lives with her old and sick grandfather who runs an organ grinder that helps them to barely pay the rent every month and leaves little or no money at all for food. Each and every day of the girl goes to work with her grandfather, implying that the child neither goes to school nor has a social life.

One day she finds a very ill cat who she names Fausto and decides to keep him. The cat is unable to take care of himself, forcing the girl to provide food for him. Her decision causes criticism from her grandfather, alluding that if the cat cannot survive for himself, he is useless and does not deserve to live.

Although the cat brings joy to the girl and gives her a reason to live, after so much severe judgment from her grandfather and several failing attempts on her part to teach the cat to find food by himself, she decides to kill the cat. When she returns to her barren she explains to her grandfather that she has killed the cat because he was useless and as such did not deserve to live.

The old man is horrified, realizing that his little grandchild has come to the conclusion that everything useless has to die. He begins to wonder what will happen to him as he grows older and becomes incapable of taking care of himself.

The story depicts the challenges that children and adults face in trying to cope during times when food is scarce. Matute highlights the dilemmas confronted by children and the manner in which they are forced to mature and behave as adults in order to stay alive in post war Spain.

The narrative voice describes the physical condition of the child and the place where she and her grandfather live, “The girl had a very skinny body, and her legs and arms full of scratches. She was disheveled but had a red ribbon around her head. She had only a pair of shoes, too big, and sometimes she used to lose one when running. She lived with her grandfather, in a single room, with a little stove and two straw mattresses” (Nisguritzer as cited in Mujica 572).

The author also portrays the passive attitude of the people towards the suffering of others. The narrative voice states that, “People walked in a hurry, indifferent” (Nisguritzer as cited in Mujica 575), in reference to those who did not care about the old man and the girl standing in a corner asking for some spare change. However, the generalized unconcerned disposition of people seems justified when we learn that, “each and every one of them had their burdens and their own afflicted ones” (Nisguritzer as cited in Mujica 573).

In order to understand the challenges faced by adults and children in Spain’s post-civil war it is necessary to describe the emotional and the financial situation of Spain as analyzed by Mercedes Camino, “An extended period of autarky marked by poverty, hunger and immense sadness, the war’s aftermath meant the total loss of hope for many people, with fruitless years succeeding each other, clouded in the mist of an eternal winter” (94). Camino could not describe with better eloquence the hopeless future of Spain and its people.

But poverty and loss of hope were not the only consequences faced by the Spaniards. Fear and repression were part of their daily life as states by Julius Ruiz in his article *Seventy years on: Historians and Repression during and after the Spanish Civil War*:

One of the most prolific authors in this regard was the anarchist journalist Eduardo de Guzmán...De Guzmán also wrote generally about the Francoist repression, and in April 1978 asserted the existence of one million political prisoners and 200,000 executions after the Civil war. Although work had been published after 1975 on other aspects of the repression, such as forced labour, the vexed issue of executions, continued to preoccupy historians (454).

Another example of the chaotic state of Spain during and after the civil war is presented by Angela Cenarro. Her perception of the atmosphere surrounding the civil war gives us a translucent mental image of the situation:

The republican defeat in April 1939 left a society that was not only divided between victors and the vanquished, but also fragmented, disintegrated, dismembered by the effects of violence, fear, psychological paralysis and suspicion that invaded the public sphere, as a result of the rationale of vengeance and denunciation. It was a society that was invaded by the implacable effect of the mechanisms of official and unofficial control at the hands of the victors at a local level (parish priests, local *Movimiento* officials, collaborators among the public, and so on). Thus, there were many more victims than appeared in the firing squad lists: as Conxita Mir put it, there were many ‘non-accountable effects’ of the repression, because there were a good many consequences arising from the enemy’s annihilation project that was imposed on all aspects of daily life (204).

The protagonists of the story suffer both psychologically and emotionally, however, the cause of their agony has roots in the disordered world that encircle them. The extermination of families, the suffering of innocent children, the repression and violence suffered by the Spanish citizens are among the most controversial issues arising from the Spanish Civil War.

Despite the millions of adults who suffered heavy consequences because of the civil war, these ‘forgotten’ children suffered the most and carried their emotional distress for the rest of their lives. The hopes of an entire generation vanished with the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. The children who experienced the pain of this devastating war no longer had goals and ambitions of their own, but instead dreamed of escaping poverty.

Mercedes Camino highlights this idea by accentuating that “Within this world, as Gwynne Edwards observes, ‘people’s dreams and ambitions are doomed . . . husbands and wives are driven apart by disillusionment, and . . . children are marked by it all’” (92). More importantly the Spanish Civil War destroyed thousands of families and innocent children who never recovered from the tragedies experienced in this horrible war.

Sam Jones cites the words of Natalia Benjamin, one of the co-founders of the association to bring together these lost children. She states, “The niños are the forgotten ones of the Spanish civil war; nobody talks about them. In the history books that were written about the civil war, they are confined to about three lines, but they were victims of Franco, just as much as other people” (no.page).

More than seven decades have passed since the Spanish Civil War has ended, and still the Spaniards find themselves looking for answers that nobody seems to have.

These lost children make the Spanish Civil War a decisive turning point in the history of Spain. Although the country has been gradually emerging from those horrific times, the hardship of losing an entire generation to war will forever remain a dark mark on not only the country itself, but on those individuals whose lives were altered forever.

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