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Review of Eduardo González-Calleja, *Cifras Cruentas: Las víctimas mortales de la violencia sociopolítica en la segunda república española, 1931-1936*

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**González-Calleja, Eduardo. *Cifras Cruentas: Las víctimas mortales de la violencia sociopolítica en la segunda república española, 1931-1936*. Granada: Comares, 2015. 504 pp.**

As an undergraduate, when first reading Edward Malefakis' *Agrarian Reform and Peasant Revolution in Spain*, I was told that this was the kind of book that historians should be grateful to the author for having written. Even more so, I was told, because now no other poor soul would have to attempt it. *Cifras Cruentas*, the latest impressive book by Eduardo González-Calleja, falls into the same category. This is not an easy read, but it is certainly worth the effort.

As the author reminds us in the introduction to this book, one of the foundational myths of Francoism related to the supposed 'chaos' and 'violence' that accompanied the experience of democracy during Spain's Second Republic. In particular, the period of Popular Front government, following the bitterly-contested election of February 1936, was portrayed as a time of 'mounting' chaos and violence, perhaps even a prelude – *pace* the Kerensky experience in Russia in 1917 – to an imminent communist revolution in Spain. Even before the Francoist propaganda machine began its work, chilling summaries of political murder, arson, anticlerical violence and forcible expropriations had been offered to the Spanish Cortes in the Spring of 1936 by the leading right-wing politicians of the day, José María Gil Robles and José Calvo Sotelo. This narrative would subsequently be repeated *ad nauseam* by supporters of the military coup, both in Spain and abroad. More recently, the narrative has been recycled in a series of best-selling 'revisionist' accounts of the period by authors such as Pio Moa. It is vital to distinguish these works – as González-Calleja emphatically does (44) – from the more rigorous and plausible work of university-based historians such as Fernando del Rey Reguillo, Roberto Villa and Manuel Álvarez Tardio. Nonetheless, numerous serious historical studies in recent years have skirted close to this foundational myth of Francoism, attempting to show, *inter alia*: that the political architecture of the Republican system (and political behavior of its leading architects) was exclusionist; that political violence was endemic during the five peacetime years of the Republic; that the period of Popular Front government after February 1936 saw an escalation of these basic flaws of the Republican system; and that the government became increasingly unable (or unwilling) to control the situation.

*Cifras Cruentas* thus arrives at a crucial moment, not only in terms of a continuing historiographical debate, but also at a time when the very nature of Spanish democracy, and the historical lessons to be drawn from Spain's recent past, are played out in political and public discourse almost daily. The book articulates what is simultaneously a very modest and very ambitious aim, namely to catalogue and analyze the importance of acts of lethal 'socio-political' violence during the peacetime years of the Spanish Second Republic. Without claiming total scientific detachment or objectivity, González-Calleja nonetheless makes a compelling case for traditional quantitative history to compare, contrast and contextualize socio-political violence in the period. We owe a debt of gratitude to the author for his painstaking collation of data from myriad primary sources, and equally serious engagement with an array of (often conflicting) secondary treatments of the period, which has allowed him to construct a vast database of every known episode of violence in these five years. González-Calleja is nonetheless sensitive to the fact that numbers, on their own, tell us little. It is the contextualization of raw data

through sensitive use of relevant theoretical literature and approaches that adds power to the analysis. He rightly takes issue (47-48) with those scholars who interpret such data through a narrowly political lens, and refuse to acknowledge the importance of structural and social histories that might explain the nature and extent of violence.

And what of the figures? *Cifras Cruentas* confirms that the Republic represented one of the most violent periods in contemporary Spanish history, and indeed, easily (and unnervingly) warrants comparison with the worst periods of violence in other fledgling democracies in the period: Weimar Germany, pre-Fascist Italy and Austria. According to the author's figures, at least 2629 people lost their lives as a result of socio-political violence in the peacetime years of the Republic (74-75). The most damning statistic offered here demonstrates, however, that over half of these killings came at the hands of state security operatives – Civil Guard, Assault Guard, Police and Military – even if we exclude the brutal government repression of the Asturias rising of October 1934. Far from permitting political violence, the state was more often than not its author (78). This extends to the period of the Popular Front when allegedly 'weak' governments were supposedly unable (or unwilling) to act. Leftist activists and adherents were statistically much more likely to be victims of violence after April 1931, even in periods when left and centre-left governments held power. In the first biennium, for example, 55.12% of victims can be identified as belonging to left-wing organizations, compared to just 6.64% of victims belonging to right-wing organizations (147). Nine out of ten of the most lethal incidents in these five years involved state repression of leftist movements (99). The most lethal period of the Republic was the second biennium – dubbed by the left at the time as the 'bienio negro'. Even excluding Asturias – where reliable figures for civilian, as opposed to government casualties, remain illusive – this two-year period saw 373 killings. If we include the failed uprising against the government in 1934, González-Calleja calculates that 1457 Spaniards lost their lives in socio-political violence in this biennium, or 55.42% of all such killings in the entire peacetime period of the Second Republic (74-75).

The calumnious association of the Republican regime with inherent anticlericalism is comprehensively refuted by the available data. Despite Azaña's much-quoted remark that 'all the churches in Spain are not worth the life of a single Republican', the infamous *quema de los conventos* of May 1931 did not result in a single clerical killing. By contrast, nine Spaniards were killed by the forces of law and order during the disturbances, with Madrid alone seeing four dead and twelve wounded at the hands of the Guardia Civil. Indeed, González-Calleja concludes that just two religious personnel were victims of lethal violence in the first biennium, and in neither case can it be linked obviously to "popular anticlericalism or the secular policies introduced by the reformist government" (158). Anticlerical sentiment and violence, which the author correctly reminds us had a long tradition in Spain before 1931, only descended into lethal violence during the Asturias revolt of October 1934, where up to 37 ecclesiastics lost their lives, "for the first time in the Republican period" (240-244).

González-Calleja does not shy from presenting the data compiled by other scholars, indeed there are copious recapitulations and comparisons of competing secondary analyses of mortal violence under the Republic. In the case of the election campaign of 1936, Gonzalez-Calleja (257) actually offers a much higher estimate of political killings—72—than authors such as Rafael Cruz—25—and Álvarez Tardío—37.

He demonstrates convincingly that the Popular Front period did witness brutal and frequent political violence, but urges us to see the complex nature of, and motivations for, that violence. With just 4% of victims in this period being landowners or business owners, 30% of killings attributed to state officials, and the vast majority of victims belonging to left-wing organizations, González-Calleja concludes that the situation in pre-civil war Spain was not so much a “class war,” but rather a battle between excluded social and political groups and the state. Dismissing the twin “myths” of the “pre-revolutionary” left and the “paramilitary” right, for example, the author argues: “in the first case there was more anarchy than revolution, in the second there was more *pistolerismo* and acts of provocation or revenge than punitive expeditions in the form of a fascist ‘conquest of power.’ The great violent actors of the Spring of 1936 and across the Republican period were the corps and forces of state security, whose view of protest was characterized by inflexibility and the disproportionate use of force” (306). Given the wealth of supportive documentary and secondary material, it is unusual that González-Calleja does not offer such robust conclusions more frequently. He is at times modest to a fault.

Myths die hard, and Francoist myths die harder than most in contemporary Spain. Given the centrality of this subject to interpretations of the causes of, and responsibility for, the military coup of 1936, it is unlikely that *Cifras Cruentas* will be the last book-length study of political violence during the Spanish Second Republic. For the moment at least, González-Calleja has provided the most rigorous, documented and theoretically contextualized account of the subject available. The myths of an inherently anticlerical republic, widespread politically organized murder between left and right, and a Republican state unable or unwilling to combat “mounting” violence, have been shown to be just that. As it happens, between April 1931 and July 1936 the Spanish state was all too willing and able to use violence against its own citizens in defense of “law and order.” *Plus ça change.*

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