

2011

Review of: Julián Casanova, *The Spanish Republic and Civil War*

Wayne H. Bowen

Southeast Missouri State University, wayne.bowen@ucf.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs>

Recommended Citation

Bowen, Wayne H. (2011) "Review of: Julián Casanova, *The Spanish Republic and Civil War*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

<https://doi.org/10.26431/0739-182X.1023>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol35/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* by an authorized editor of Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. For more information, please contact jesus@udel.edu.

Casanova, Julián. *The Spanish Republic and Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Xxi + 358 pp.

Over the past decades, historians on both sides of the Atlantic have argued over the origins and course of the Spanish Civil War. Some assigned the collapse of the Spanish Republic and the horrors of 1936-1939 to the Left; even more blamed army officers, fascists and others on the Right. While this debate has been compelling, Casanova's book articulates a more balanced perspective on this conflict, the memory of which remains contentious in Spanish historiography and politics. In his narrative, Casanova countervails against received perceptions, describing cabals of insurrectionist - but also republican - Army officers, conservative enthusiasm for the Spanish Republic in its infancy, the ambivalence of the organized Left to democracy, and the disparities of political expectations by the factions on both sides of the war.

Casanova's careful analysis of the origins of the Spanish Republic shows the importance of contingency in the making of the Republic. No leader or movement knew exactly what it would mean to live under a constitutional system, a fact that explains many of the baffling miscalculations by key actors during the five years of Spain's republic. Still, Casanova makes clear that the republic began more strongly than is often conceded, with overwhelming support during its first few years. Even the election of 1933, which brought the conservative CEDA into the government, reflected continued success by constitutional parties, albeit in the case of CEDA one committed to reversing reforms, such as those against the church, army and landowners.

The countervailing pressures against the republic were increasingly powerful, but were not just among the military officers, Carlist monarchists and fascist Falangists. While right-wing opposition grew in the face of the anti-clerical legislation of the republic, there were also strong parties in the working classes that were at best ambivalent about Spanish democracy. The anarchist movement, in particular, with its embrace of violence, the general strike, and the destruction of government as a core principle, played a distinctively negative role during the era. Fear of anarchism, socialism and communism, most exemplified by the terror engendered by the 1934 Asturias uprising by the Left, convinced business owners and the middle classes that security lay in the army, which put down the insurrection, rather than with the republic itself.

The Catholic Church and its relationship to the state remained a fault line during the republican period. As Casanova points out, Spain was divided by geography and belief: an ardently Catholic rural Spain and a ferociously anti-clerical urban Spain, but also an ambivalent moderate middle throughout. Regional differences crystallized during the Civil War as, with few exceptions, Catholic zones corresponded to the areas where the Nationalist rebels had their initial victories. Casanova does reach a bit far in his dismissal of CEDA as a mostly reactionary party, at the same time accepting that most socialists and communists reconciled to the republic after the failure of the 1934 Asturias uprising. Still, he does concede that there were strong elements on both the right and the left that were willing to work within the constitutional framework of the Second Republic. Nothing, even as late as 1934-35, predestined the coming of civil war.

The February 1936 election, however, did set the terms for the collapse of the republic. A close vote among the electorate, because of a more effective coalition by the Popular Front, resulted in a disproportionately large victory by this coalition of socialists, left republicans, Communists, and anarchists (who voted, but did not run candidates). Paradoxically, it was the victory of the left that led many of the Popular Front's supporters to promote maximalist demands, rather than working within the system they had just won through a free election. The right responded with denunciations of what they saw as an imminent threat of communism and anarchism, and streets battles and assassinations soon emerged as common events. The moderate parties, including CEDA, left and center republicans, and one wing of the Socialist Party, began to hemorrhage support, a process culminating in the Civil War.

The Civil War itself, launched by a military insurrection in July 1936, was a bloody affair, with battlefield casualties combined in both rear areas, Republican and Nationalist, with mass executions. Whether unorganized militia killings of priests and class enemies in the Republican Zone, or methodical purges of republicans in the Nationalist Zone, these murders hardened both sides and made reconciliation, regardless of who won, nearly impossible. While the author seems more willing to minimize or contextualize violence committed by Republicans, he does explain the violence on both sides with sophistication unusual in the historiography.

Casanova is particularly effective in his discussions of the difficulties of those in the middle – the Spaniards who did not feel a strong attachment to either side, but because of the course of the war were forced to pledge loyalty to whomever occupied their town or region. Indifference to the war was not an option, however, in the minds of both Republican and Nationalist authorities,

forcing an often ambivalent population, just concerned with food and security for themselves and their families, to embrace the slogans and platforms of the politically and militarily active under whom they lived. This book is one that should find many audiences; historians of modern Spain, general readers interested in a readable one-volume introduction to the 1930s in Spain, and others following broader developments in Europe. While this book does not quite arrive at the objectivity necessary for a full summation of the Spanish Republic and Civil War, it comes closer than any serious recent attempt, and for that receives a critical, but ultimately positive review.

Wayne H. Bowen
Southeast Missouri State University