

2011

Reviews of: Olivia Muñoz-Rojas, *Ashes and Granite: Destruction and Reconstruction after the Spanish Civil War and its Aftermath* and Dacia Viejo-Rose, *Reconstructing Spain: Cultural Heritage and Memory after Civil War*

David Messenger

University of Wyoming, dmesseng@uwyo.edu

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

Recommended Citation

Messenger, David (2011) "Reviews of: Olivia Muñoz-Rojas, *Ashes and Granite: Destruction and Reconstruction after the Spanish Civil War and its Aftermath* and Dacia Viejo-Rose, *Reconstructing Spain: Cultural Heritage and Memory after Civil War*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 36 : Iss. 1 , Article 20.

<https://doi.org/10.26431/0739-182X.1073>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol36/iss1/20>

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.

Muñoz-Rojas, Olivia. *Ashes and Granite: Destruction and Reconstruction after the Spanish Civil War and its Aftermath* Brighton, Portland, Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2011, xxv + 223 pp. Illustrations and maps.

Viejo-Rose, Dacia. *Reconstructing Spain: Cultural Heritage and Memory after Civil War* Brighton, Portland, Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2011, xxix + 301 pp. Illustrations, maps and tables.

What happens in the aftermath of war? Reconstruction is a term often thought of in a physical sense, but using Spain after 1939 as case studies, both of these works challenge us to delve deeper into the meaning of the term and examine its implications for propagandistic, cultural and symbolic meanings. They seek to have us look at landscapes in an entirely new way and to contextualize and complicate our own interpretations of various sites by understanding their design, purpose and use in the effort to rebuild Spain after the civil conflict of 1936-1939.

Recounting the extensive aerial bombing that occurred across during the Civil War, Olivia Muñoz-Rojas argues that after the fighting, the regime of General Francisco Franco had “an unparalleled opportunity of rebuilding the country” and doing so in a manner that reflected “the values the Nationalists had purportedly fought to reinstate: unity, discipline, honor, hierarchy”(2). Similarly, Dacia Viejo-Rose begins her study of post-Civil War Spain by asking “What role cultural heritage plays in post-conflict reconstruction, whether as a motor for the prolongation of violence or as a resource for building reconciliation” (1). Both authors draw extensively on photographs and other visual images like architectural plans while also grounding themselves in the archives of various municipalities, regions and central administrative organs like those of the *Ministerio de Gobernación’s Dirección General Regiones Devastadas*. The result is two important studies not only for Spanish historians of the immediate post-Civil War era but for anyone interested in the uses of historical memory and places and the revision of such sites that come about as a result of the need for physical reconstruction after conflict.

Muñoz-Rojas focuses on three case studies in Madrid, Bilbao and Barcelona in order to assess the plans and achievements of the Franco regime in the field of reconstruction during the immediate years after the war. In Madrid,

early initiatives by the *Falange* to build a new headquarters influenced by Nazi and Fascist architecture as part of an effort to recast the capital as a center of administrative and imperial power fell short. In Bilbao, the need for quickly rebuilding the city's river bridges destroyed by retreating Republican troops gave the Franco regime both a propagandistic opportunity to rally against "red barbarism" and a chance to put forth new structures that evoked modernism and the promise of a 'New Spain'. Meanwhile, in Barcelona, the bombing damage in the city center allowed the construction of what is now called Avengeda de la Catedral and fulfill longer term visions of a central avenue into old Barcelona. It also gave the regime the chance to reveal Roman ruins in the old quarter and exploit them for the purpose of linking the new regime to the glories of a Roman past. Muñoz-Riojas details each case well while drawing out the significant gaps between plans and reality, between national visions and local needs, and the effort to change cities within a regime that celebrated the rural.

Dacia Viejo-Rose offers a more theoretical work, grounding her study within the framework of post-conflict studies and memory studies to examine how symbolic landscapes are built in a way that possibly "prolongs the violence of the war into the post-conflict period, planting antagonistic symbols of difference that continue to provoke fear and hatred and operate against reconciliation" (3-4). Drawing on ideas about history, monuments, cultural resources, space and *lieux de mémoire*, Viejo-Rose defines reconstruction as being a complex phenomenon that revisions place, rewrites history, remembers selective events and myths and recodifies space (199). The result is a new 'heritage-scape' that is meant to "structure spaces and their meanings" (202). While she, like Muñoz-Rojas, points out gaps between ambitions and reality (211), Viejos-Rose argues that the transformation of space desired by the Franco regime was more successful than not, at least in the short and medium-term. The book does this in two ways, first through a general examination of policies associated with reconstruction and the central government's *DG Regiones Devastadas*, and second, through a case study of Gernika.

In her examination of the nation as a whole, Viejo-Rose outlines important propagandistic themes like celebration of historical figures like the Catholic Kings and El Cid and the comparison between them and Nationalist heroes of the Civil War. Looking at how these themes revealed themselves in particular places and at particular sites, the author examines the rebuilding of the small towns of Belchite and Brunete, both of which changed hands numerous times in the conflicts and which were extensively destroyed. In Brunete, the entire town was re-planned and new housing and street-building projects were propagandized as heralding the modern Spain (60-61). In Belchite, the original town was left in ruins and a new town was built 500 meters away; new modern planning stood alongside ruins and

memorials to fallen martyrs (88-90). Practical reality invaded this planned symbolic landscape, because reconstruction took so long, most residents lived amongst the ruins for over 15 years (90). Nonetheless, the ambitions that the Belchite case demonstrated allow Viejo-Rose to define reconstruction of cultural heritage as physical, symbolic and social (198).

Using a case study of Gernika, Viejo-Rose notes how any trace of the town's destruction by bombing on April 27, 1937 was removed and a new, modern market opened in 1943 alongside a town hall that used some Basque elements while also incorporating more typical Spanish designs in terms of roads and space leading to the plaza. All of this was not only about removing signs of the bombing, but also was an effort to downplay the town's history as a center of Basque rights and Basque culture (122-127).

One of the most important contributions in Viejo-Rose's work is the decision to extend her analysis beyond the short- and medium-term of the 1940s and 1950s. From the moment of the Gernika bombing onwards, she analyzes the other 'reconstruction' of Gernika outside of Spain, amongst Republicans and their supporters. She also moves forward to examine the memory of the site in the immediate period of Transition, 1975-82, and since 2004 with the efforts of the Zapatero government to incorporate historical memory into the culture and politics of Spain. The extensive construction of monuments and the holding of public events in Gernika, and the transformation of the town as a symbol of victimhood into a symbol for peace-building reflect her argument that reconstruction is constant, and that it is necessary to understand the stages involved (195). In the case of Gernika, Franco's vision of a suppressed victimhood had to be followed by commemoration of victims, typified by the mausoleum erected in the town's cemetery in 1994, before the town could become a site for peace-building conferences and other related activities.

The replication of images and plans necessary for the arguments of both authors is extensive in both books, and Sussex Academic Press should be congratulated for the efforts made in this respect. Dacia Viejo-Rose's *Reconstructing Spain* also includes a number of insets that develop the history and critical analysis of specific sites like Brunete, Belchite and *Valle de los Caídos* as well as issues provoked by the Law on Historical Memory like the excavation of the supposed grave of Federico García Lorca (164).

Reading these two books together is a worthwhile exercise, and leaves many questions to explore. Olivia Muñoz-Rojas emphasizes the gap between rhetoric and reality, and she underlines that the Franco regime was not only "repressive" but also "lethargic" and that the visions of a new Spain fell short

given these attitudes (67). Vacia-Rose, on the other hand, believes Spain serves as an excellent case to study the transformation of landscapes through reconstruction and that it allows one to draw out the symbolic narratives inherent in the process of “re-visioning the nation” (197). Moreover, by moving beyond the Franco era, Vacia-Rose also seeks to demonstrate that one re-visioning effort, even carried out over 30-plus years, did not eliminate the other heritage of the civil war, that of the Republicans, which continues to shape and re-shape the Spanish landscape. All three conclusions strike this reader as true, and thus there remains a need to continue to examine and deconstruct the myths, symbols and narratives of the Civil War as they appear in Spanish and diasporic places.

David A. Messenger
University of Wyoming