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The Open Window: Women in Spain's Second Republic and Civil War

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Abstract

This article intends to be a brief introduction to a sometimes neglected issue of the recent Spanish history: the extraordinary progress the short-lived Second Republic (1931-1936) meant for women. The significant and somewhat revolutionary achievements at a social, legal and political level were shadowed by the Civil War and the long forty years of the subsequent dictatorship. However, studying and recovering the history of women during the Republican period enable us to better understand to which extent Franco's regime was a dramatic step backward also in terms of women's rights.

Keywords

Republican women – Second Spanish Republic – Spanish Civil War – women's rights

Addressing women's history invariably requires a microscopic view. Their presence and participation are always essential, but most of the time they are invisible. It is impossible, however, to reconstruct the 20th century in a rigorous manner without taking women and their personal and collective history into consideration. Spain is not an exception in that regard. As is well known, our recent history is darkly marked by a bloody dictatorship that lasted almost forty years. Franco's dictatorship repressed and forced women to a minority of age from which they would not be freed until much later. It took a long time for women to regain or achieve some rights we now consider basic or fundamental. But, did they have something to regain? Was there a time in the past when they already had such rights? This article tries to show how the Second Spanish

Republic (1931-1936) represented a tremendous step forward for women in Spain. Sadly, it was only a short-time window of opportunity that would be abruptly and brutally closed until the end of the 1970s.

In 1930, just one year before the proclamation of the Second Republic, the female illiteracy rate was around 44 percent, and in general terms women's situation had not changed much since the turn of the century. In the 1930s, women outnumbered men in Spain (12 million out of a population of 23.5 million). Of them, less than ten percent worked outside the home. If we leave aside girls and school-goers, it could be said that practically all women were devoted to household tasks. By contrast, almost all the adult men worked outside the home according to the census. Furthermore, women working outside the home had much lower wages than their male peers (a problem still unsolved in Spain).

The Republic brought a series of improvements with regard to social, civil and political rights of great relevance for women. According to the historian Mirta Núñez (2004), the Republic prompted women to have and seek an autonomous presence in the public sphere, a presence not subordinated to men. It pushed them to seek and find paid employment in order to make a living on their own, and it also tried to instill equality in early education.

The introduction of the universal suffrage was an essential yet controversial milestone. The discussion of Article 34 of the Republican Constitution (Article 36 in its final drafting) begun on September 30, 1931. Women's suffrage was eventually enshrined in the Republican Constitution (approved by the Constituent Assembly on December 9, 1931) after a heated debate between Clara Campoamor and Victoria Kent. The former advocated for women's right to vote, while the latter considered that it would contribute to the weakening of the progressive forces in future elections. The Socialist Party (PSOE) regarded women as unduly influenced and subject to the Church, and some Republicans thought that women were, by nature, "hysterical, and therefore they should only be allowed to vote after menopause."¹ As is well known, Clara

1 During the Parliamentary discussion on the recognition of women's suffrage, Hilario Ayuso, MP from the Federal Republican Party (which would later be part of the leftist *Popular Front* with the PSOE), proposed an amendment so as to establish men's voting age at 18 and women's at 45. In the debates of the 1931 Constituent Parliament, a MP and Professor of Medical Pathology opposed women's right to vote on the basis that women are not reflective and do not master critical thinking, but are instead dominated by emotions and feelings; hysteria, he argued, is inherent to women's psychology.

Campoamor won that debate and women were granted the right to vote for the first time in the history of Spain.²

The recognition of civil marriage (Article 41 of the Republican Constitution) would follow. The Constitution established that: “marriage is based on equal rights for both sexes.” The Republic’s supreme law also granted equal rights to legitimate and illegitimate children, as well as providing for the investigation on paternity. The reforms of the Civil and Criminal Codes also implied the decriminalization of adultery (until then, cuckolded husbands were legally entitled to kill the adulterous wife, but not vice versa). Also, legal penalties and punishments became the same regardless of the sex of the offender. Divorce was legalized in 1932 as dissolution of marriage by mutual consent, which was a core issue for the freedom and autonomy of women. Significantly, during the first two years of implementation of this law, 56 percent of applications for divorce were filed by women. This measure put Spain at the head of Europe in this regard. France had already authorized it in 1796; England in 1857 and Portugal, upon the arrival of the Republic, in 1910; and the last European countries to enact it were Italy (1970), Ireland (1995) and Malta (2011). The establishment of Franco’s dictatorship was a tremendous setback for the legal equality of men and women in Spain. From an advanced position in these matters, it became a proud example of retrograde regulation. In fact, it was not until 1981, in the aftermath of Franco’s regime, that divorce was again legalized in Spain. The maternity insurance benefit was also enacted, covering more than seven hundred thousand female workers. It was a public health care service, including maternity leave and economic support for working mothers. It was in force between 1931 and 1935, as very well documented by Professor of Contemporary History Mary Nash (2003).

One of the most important reforms the Republic intended to carry out was the separation, once and for all, of Church and State. Unsurprisingly, this granted the new system a lot of enemies, but it represented a huge step forward for society, and especially for women, since the role attributed to them by the Church was in no way similar to the one they wanted to take. Indeed, although we cannot elaborate now on this issue, Franco’s *National Catholicism* showed the importance of this policy: under the dictatorship, women’s role was once again to stay home, take care of the husband and children, go to Mass, endure some blows, wash the dirty laundry at home, be faithful and not voice their opinion. So much so that they were not even entitled to open a bank account, go to the dentist, apply for a credit or open a business (as well as many other

²For a more detailed information on the process leading to the adoption of the 1931 Constitution, see Juliá, Santos. 2009. *La Constitución de 1931*. Madrid: Iustel.

activities) without the signature or approval of their husbands or fathers until the 1970s. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that the Second Republic freed women from the economic dependence on their husbands or fathers. It did not last long.

Another of the main projects of the Second Republic was educational reform, drawing from the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza* (Free Educational Institution). The *Institución Libre de Enseñanza* was an educational initiative founded in 1876 by a group of intellectuals led by Giner de los Ríos and inspired by the philosophy of Krausism. It focused on secularism, the rejection of any kind of dogmatism and the integration of art and culture in education. Azaña himself said, referring to the secularization of education, that: “neither my party nor I will ever, under any circumstance, endorse a legislative clause under which education may be entrusted to religious orders. It shall never happen. I am deeply sorry, but that is the true defence of the Republic.” In addition to all the foregoing measures (right to vote, divorce, equality, etc.), the public promotion of education and culture fostered the presence of women in many careers and professions, some of which had until then been completely reserved to men, such as architecture.

The Republic purported to take education to every corner in Spain. For that purpose, it significantly increased public spending on education. In fact, in 1937—in the midst of the Civil War—20 million pesetas were earmarked for education (compared with the eight million expenditure on education during the last monarchic government). In 1931, 7,000 jobs were created for teachers (men and women) in order to achieve that goal. As we have said before, the Republican educational project was public and nonreligious, but it was also universal, bilingual, compulsory and free as regards primary education, where equality was taught, often in mixed schools. Access to secondary and higher education was also facilitated to those with financial problems.

As the historian Elena Sánchez de Madariaga (2012) says in her remarkable book on Republican women teachers: “during the Republic there were many teachers identified with the ideas of freedom of thought and academic freedom, promotion of individual liberty, secularism . . . They used experimental and participatory learning methods, fostering creativity [. . .]. These teachers took part in the wide variety of educational and cultural activities implemented by the Republic: adult women schools, pedagogical missions, popular libraries, school camps . . .” Teachers performed an essential public function both in cities and towns: they were the role models for their students and for the whole society. It is worth noting that the so-called pedagogical missions brought theatre, cinema and mobile libraries to rural areas. Renowned intellectuals

such as the poet Rafael Alberti and the philosopher María Zambrano—later forced into exile—were among the promoters of these missions.

Many women were members of political parties like the Socialist Party or the Communist Party, associations, trade unions, etc. And this is another clear example of how Republican women took a public space—politics—from which they had been banished until then and made it theirs. During the Republic, women actively participated in politics in different ways, just like men. They could vote and be elected. There were women members of the Parliament (a minority, of course): Victoria Kent served as the General-Secretary for Prisons, and she undertook a rather progressive reform aimed at the social reinsertion of women prisoners; the anarchist Federica Montseny, Minister of Health and Social Assistance, was the first woman to hold a ministerial post in Western Europe; Clara Campoamor, Dolores Ibarruri (Pasionaria) were also members of the Parliament. But along with all these famous names, there were thousands of militant women who participated in political organizations: different political groups and unions emerged, and women led many of them. At the same time, women associations were created with different goals and ideological foundations.

In 1933 the Spanish branch of the World Committee of Women against War and Fascism, was launched by the Communist Party along the lines of the Third Communist International. It was a unitary female organization devoted to the struggle against fascism and Hitler and Mussolini's war plans. Its Chairwoman in Spain was Dolores Ibarruri. Catalina Salmerón, the daughter of Nicolás Salmerón (a former President of the First Republic, a philosopher who resigned for refusing to sign death warrants), was appointed the Honorary Chairwoman. This organization, also known as "Association of Antifascist Women" (Asociación de Mujeres Antifascista, AAA in Spanish), took part in the First World Congress of Women Against War and Fascism held in Paris in 1934, and also set up two national congresses, the second of which was held in the midst of the Civil War (1937).

Upon the outbreak of the war, many women joined the fight in the trenches as partisans. There are notorious examples like that of Rosario Sánchez Mora, better known by her nickname La Dinamitera (The Dynamiter), who lost a hand during the war when the grenade she was about to launch exploded. The Government's need for women's help, as well as their energy and disposition, contributed to the adoption of very progressive measures unthinkable just a few years earlier: legalization of free unions, including partisans' widows, aviation instruction, access to professional training, incorporation

of women into the war industry, etc. Moreover, abortion was decriminalized in 1937 by the Ministry of Health, headed by the anarchist Federica Montseny.

Trade unions were essential for the sustainment of the war industry. This was the case of some traditionally female unions, like Madrid's Sindicato de la Aguja (Needle Union), but women also played a leading role joining the industry. For example, they worked in assembly lines, taking charge of ammunition or in the manufacture of mortars. The sustainment and survival of the Republic largely depended on women's contribution both in production tasks and in the organization of the rearguard.

Such sustainment was carried out by a large number of women and organizations such as the Association of Antifascist Women (AMA), the anarchist organization of Free Women and the Unión the Muchachas, or Union of Young Women under the JSU—Unified Socialist Youth. The work performed by these organizations was extensive: the AMA had more than 50,000 members, and it created grass-root organizations across the Spanish Republican territory. Likewise, through their participation in the Inter-ministerial committee within the Government of the Republic they were assigned organizational tasks regarding the rearguard and army supplies in cooperation with the Ministries of War, Industry and Trade.

Furthermore, women took an active part in the guerrillas (known as Maquis) that opposed and resisted Franco's dictatorship during the years immediately after the Civil War. Their role during the subsequent repression was remarkable: they risked their lives assuming the clandestine reconstruction of left organizations (especially the Communist Party), delivering information and messages to and from the prisons, etc. Many of them were arrested, imprisoned, tortured and executed for this reason. The most representative example of this new kind of woman forged in the Republican values of freedom, equality and political participation may be that of the so-called Thirteen Roses. They were thirteen women, all of them members of the Unified Socialist Youth, arrested for their political activism, accused of crimes they never committed (like the murder of Gabaldón, a Commander of the Guardia Civil who was killed when they were already in prison) and sentenced to death. Twelve of them were minors. They were shot by a firing squad against the walls of the East cemetery in Madrid on the early hours of August 5, 1939. That was the last time a Franco tribunal would issue a death sentence against minors due to the great international impact of the case.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that the Second Republic was an essential factor of modernization and progress in Spain. The Republic contributed extraordinarily to women's emancipation and their incorporation to the public sphere: teachers, politicians and others shaped a new social environment defined by values that also implied a revolutionary shift in private life. After the fascist uprising in 1936, women projected their leading role into the war, actively participating in different activities and fighting on all the fronts. All this process was abruptly interrupted by Franco's victory and subsequent dictatorship, which brutally punished Republican women for their boldness. Hence, it may be said that women were doubly repressed during those long forty years: on the one side, for their commitment with the Republic; on the other, for challenging the role to which they had been traditionally confined by the conservative forces.

As the historian Ramón Carande said, the history of Spain is defined by "too many setbacks" (González Calleja et al. 2015). Since the Republic was one of those rare periods of progress, it is essential—particularly as regards the history of women—not to lose sight of its legal, cultural and social achievements and, at the same time, their vulnerability. Surprisingly enough, Spain is today a country without memory. It has forgotten the meaning and consequences of the short-lived Republic and it is still severely indebted to the victims of Franco's repression. Let's recall that Spain is the second country—only after Cambodia—in terms of disappeared persons. Around 130,000 unidentified people are still in mass graves by and under the roads across the country. In this regard, the remarks and observations by both the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances and the Human Rights Committee are particularly meaningful:

The Committee recalls that the search for persons who have been the victims of enforced disappearance and efforts to clarify their fate are obligations of the State even if no formal complaint has been laid, and that relatives are entitled, *inter alia*, to know the truth about the fate of their disappeared loved ones. In this connection, the Committee recommends that the State party should adopt all the necessary measures, including the allocation of sufficient human, technical and financial resources, to search for and clarify the fate of disappeared persons.

The Committee further encourages the State party to make explicit provision for the right of victims of enforced disappearance to know the truth, in conformity with the terms of article 24, paragraph 2, of the Convention

and to ensure that all victims are able fully and effectively to enjoy that right [...].³

It is precisely with regard to the pursuit of the truth and the provision of an appropriate compensation that the Human Rights Committee has recently expressed its concern about the lacunae and deficiencies in the Spanish regulation. It has also reiterated its recommendation that Spain repeal the 1977 Amnesty law, which prevents the investigation and prosecution of past human rights violations.⁴

Therefore, it is necessary to highlight the importance of politics of historical memory—blatantly absent in Spanish political agenda. The closing line of the farewell letter written by one of the Thirteen Roses, Julia Conesa, seems especially appropriate: “Let my name not be erased from history”

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3 Committee on Enforced Disappearances, Concluding observations on the report submitted by Spain under article 29, paragraph 1, of the Convention, CED/C/ESP/CO/1, December 12, 2013, paras. 32 and 33.

4 Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Spain (CCPR/C/ESP/6), paras. 21 and 22 (Advanced unedited version, available in Spanish at: http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR/C/ESP/CO/6&Lang=En, last accessed 26 July 2015).