

WOMEN AND IMAGES OF WOMEN IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

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AT the end of the Spanish Civil War in the spring of 1939, General Franco celebrated his victory by decreeing that full military honours be accorded to two statues of the Virgin Mary.¹ The first was Our Lady of Covadonga, patron of the first great reconquest of Spain through the expulsion of Islam in the middle ages. Now, after removal by her enemies 'the Reds' during the Civil War, she had been restored to her northern shrine in Asturias, marking the completion of what the decree described as the second reconquest. The other statue was of Our Lady of the Kings (de los Reyes) in Seville, invoked—so the decree ran—during the battle of Lepanto against the Turks in 1571 and the battle of Bailén against the French in 1808, and invoked once more in the first desperate days of the military rising in July 1936, when a victory for the 'Red hordes' in Seville might have changed the whole course of the war. In Covadonga and Seville, in the undefeated stronghold of the Virgin of the Pillar in Zaragoza, and across the length and breadth of the country, the Virgin Mary had saved Spain and deserved every honour and tribute. It was equally true that from far north to far south, Franco and his armies and his Nazi, Fascist, and Islamic allies had made Spain safe for the Virgin Mary. There would be no more desecrated churches, no more burned statues, no more banned processions, just as there would be no more socialists, anarchists, communists or democrats. Spain would be Catholic and authoritarian, and Spanish women could concentrate their energies on emulating Mary, and being good wives and mothers or nuns.

Many other possibilities were closed to them. During or just after the war, all of the emancipatory legislation passed in the first phase of the Second Republic from 1931–33 was repealed or became meaningless. Women had won the vote and there had been a few women deputies in the national parliament,² but the new regime was not

¹ *Legislación Española*, ed. L. Gabilán Plà and W. D. Alcahud (8 vols., San Sebastian, 1937–1940), vii. 6–7. The author would like to thank the British Academy for a grant to do research for this paper at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

² Clara Campoamor (Radical) and Victoria Kent (Left Republican) were elected to the Constituent Cortes in June 1931, followed by Margarita Nelken (Socialist) in

based on popular suffrage and representation. On 2 March 1938 all separation and divorce petitions were suspended, and on 12 March the law of 28 June 1932 which had introduced civil marriage was annulled. On 9 March the Labour Charter promised that the State 'will liberate married women from the workshop and the factory'. On 24 May the right given to women by the 1931 Constitution, to retain a nationality different from that of their husband, was removed. The following year, on 23 September 1939, the Divorce Law of 2 March 1932 was repealed, and divorces already granted under the law, that involved canonically-married people, were declared null and void.³ The legalization of abortion by the Catalan Generalitat in December 1936 was swept away together with all vestiges of Catalan autonomy, abolished on 5 April 1938 as insurgent forces advanced on Catalonia.⁴

It was particularly evident in wartime legislation on education that the place of women was to be separate, subordinate, and domestic. This was in stark contrast to the contemporary campaign in Republican Catalonia for a 'unified school' for girls and boys in which both would be offered equal if not identical opportunities. As early as 4 September 1936 an order from the military Junta in insurgent Spain directed that when the new academic year began for secondary schools on 1 October, there must be no co-education. If a town had only one secondary school, then boys should come in the morning and girls in the afternoon, or vice versa. The ending of co-education was formalised a few days later in a decree signed by General Cabanellas, which also stipulated that all women teachers must teach in girls' schools, and that as soon as possible *only* women teachers should teach in girls' schools.⁵ Given the paucity of women with a university degree, this virtually ensured that all girls in secondary schools would receive a less academic education than would be available to some boys, with the obvious consequences.

At primary level, not only was 'essentially immoral and anti-pedagogic' co-education to end wherever practicable, but girls' schools should be overseen by women inspectors who would not exercise similar responsibilities in boys' schools. The teachers in these girls' primary schools were enjoined to orientate all their work towards

December 1931. In the November 1933 general elections three female candidates were successful for the Socialist Party, Nelken, Matilde de la Torre, and María Lejarraga de Martínez Sierra. In the February 1936 elections, Nelken and de la Torre were joined by Julia Álvarez Resana for the Socialists, Dolores Ibárruri (Communist) and Victoria Kent (Left Republican).

³ *Legislación Española*, iv, 24–5, 239–43, 26; viii, 136–7.

⁴ *Legislación Española*, iv, 109–10.

⁵ *Legislación Española*, i, part 2, 312–14, 320–1.

preparing their charges 'for their elevated function in the family and the home (hogar)' by developing sewing, gardening, and household skills. Inspectors were urged to establish local courses for women teachers, to help them prepare their pupils for their 'important maternal function'.⁶ Those in power did not underestimate the difficulty of moulding education in this way, and it is not surprising that these measures ran alongside a massive ideological purge of the teaching profession at all levels in Spain, initiated in a decree signed by Franco on 8 November 1936, and applied province by province as the insurgents gained control of ever more territory.⁷ Meanwhile, one female image was to be placed incessantly before all young Spaniards. In a circular of 9 April 1937, Enrique Suñer ordered every school to place a statue of the Virgin Mary in a prominent position, to hold daily prayers to Mary for the successful ending of the war, and to teach the children to greet teachers at the beginning and end of each day with the traditional words 'Ave Maria Purisima', to which they should reply, equally traditionally, 'conceived without sin'.⁸

It would be hard, and wrong, to evade the conclusion that one of the important issues at stake in the Spanish Civil War was the future position—legal, economic, and cultural—of women. By the summer of 1939 they found themselves, some with relief, others with repugnance, returned to the status that had obtained before the attempted New Deal of the early Republic of 1931–3. Those women who had been most active in resisting the reimposition of the traditional order had to face exile or imprisonment in appalling conditions and in many cases execution.⁹ There was no honourable or safe place for them in the new dictatorship.

The very fact that this was a *civil war*, erupting from bitter ideological disagreements, made it inevitable that conflicting views about Spanish social structure, including the role of women, were at issue. On both sides there were powerful forces emphasising a contrary interpretation of the war as a defensive struggle against foreign invasion. This was the line taken and imposed by the Communist Party, seeking to rally the widest possible support for the protection

⁶ *Legislación Española*, v. 563–6; vi. 131–4.

⁷ *Legislación Española*, i. part 2, 294. For a study of this purge in one province, see J. Crespo Redondo, *Purga de maestros en la guerra civil (Burgos provincia)* (Valladolid, 1987).

⁸ *Legislación Española*, i. part 2, 318–19.

⁹ There is a substantial and growing prison and exile literature. For women's prisons in Franco's Spain, see especially G. di Febo, *Resistencia y movimiento de mujeres en España 1936–1976* (Barcelona, 1979); on exile, see S. García Iglesias, *Exilio*, (Mexico, 1957), S. Mistral, *Exodo. Diario de una refugiada española* (Mexico, 1940), and T. Pamiès, *Records de guerra i d'exili* (Barcelona, 1976).

of the Republic against, in its view, international fascism.¹⁰ Similarly Franco himself argued that he was protecting everything authentically Spanish from being overwhelmed by foreign bolshevism. As he travelled round Spain taking that curious symbol of *Hispanidad*, the preserved arm of St Teresa of Avila, with him, all those who opposed him were, indiscriminately, anti-Spanish 'Reds'.¹¹ But the invasion thesis, however strenuously promoted on either side, could not hide the fact that this was originally and in essence a civil war. The place of women in Spanish society was of central importance, albeit more often implicitly than explicitly, within the ideological aspirations that combatants were seeking to realize.

Wherever the military rising failed, and especially in the cities, it seemed that what women looked like and what women could do was being altered almost beyond recognition. Bourgeois dress disappeared because it was seen as incriminating and dangerous, and with it went hats. It took one American visitor, Dorothy Parker, a little while to work out why people laughed at her on the streets of Valencia eighteen months or so into the war, and she then removed the offending and conspicuous hat and all was well.¹² This compulsory sartorial proletarianisation applied equally to men, and dozens of commentators mentioned it.¹³ The only permissible headgear was usually a police or military uniform cap. But because of the weight of religious and social convention governing women's head-dress, bourgeois women going bare-headed necessarily represented a new kind of gender self-presentation as well as class solidarity. This was much more apparent in the other immediate change in dress in the first days of the war. Some young women on the Republican side adopted unisex dungarees, the famous *mono*, in what was for Spain a startling break with tradition. It was practical, radical, and a protest simultaneously. A teenage Communist militant, Teresa Pamiès, reported that she never wore the blue *mono* because by the time she came from her village to Barcelona, probably in 1937, it was already out of favour, perhaps being too much associated for Communist taste with the Anarchists. But for the winter of 1937–8, she and her fellow-

¹⁰Dolores Ibárruri claimed with pride that the Communist Party had proposed this interpretation within days of the July 1936 rising; see her *Speeches and Articles 1936–38* (New York, 1938), 132–43, 232.

¹¹For a thorough discussion of Franco's propagandist use of Teresa of Avila, see G. di Febo, *La santa de la raza. Un culto barroco en la España franquista* (Barcelona, 1988).

¹²Parker's own account in *Among Friends* American International Brigade publication, Spring 1938, 4–5.

¹³Two contrasting accounts are given by George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (1966 edn.), 8–9, who found it exciting, and Clara Campoamor, *La Révolution espagnole vue par une Républicaine* (Paris, 1937), 103, who found it sinister and threatening.

militant Lena Imbert decided it was of utmost importance to acquire culottes (falda-pantalón) for entirely practical reasons connected with getting on an off lorries, riding bicycles, doing agricultural work, or clearing up debris after air-raids. On cold winter days they could be worn with a blouse and sweater, sturdy shoes and socks.¹⁴

Both dungarees and culottes were directly connected, of course, with what women wanted to do. And the most antitraditional occupation imaginable was to bear arms and be a soldier. In both Madrid and Barcelona in the very first days of the war, some young women rushed along with men to the direct defence of the Republic against the military uprising by city garrisons. A few took part in storming the Montaña Barracks in Madrid and Atarazanas in Barcelona. They joined search parties stopping people on the streets, careered around waving their rifles with male companions in requisitioned lorries, and went off to help halt the enemy advance in the Guadarrama hills north of Madrid and elsewhere, in many cases at the cost of their lives. Probably the best-known female iconography of the war is of these young soldiers with their guns and dungarees. They were sketched in a famous collection by the artist Sim (pseudonym for Vila-Rey),¹⁵ and they featured on dramatic Civil-War posters long after the phenomenon of women soldiers had virtually ceased to exist. An early casualty, Communist militant Lina Odena, was ambushed by insurgent troops in Almería and died before she was twenty, becoming a war icon. And the first British military casualty of the war was sculptress Felicia Browne, also a Communist who, already in Spain when the war began, joined the militia in Barcelona, and was shot in the head on 25 August 1936 at the front near Zaragoza.

It is tempting to contrast this brave action by militia-women at the front with the symbolic military role of the Virgin Mary, and to suggest that while one side on the war offered women a remarkable range of new activity, the other offered only symbolic public militancy and real domestic, cultural, and economic constriction, under a religious mantle. Conversely, some contemporaries argued that one side preserved and protected women in their traditional roles, while the other produced a quite new and disturbing kind of woman in the Republican cities who lacked every conventionally feminine attribute. As early as 25 July 1936 *The Times* carried a description of a man smashing a statue of a saint with a wooden mallet in the Church of Cor de María in Barcelona, while, more remarkably, 'women and

¹⁴T. Pamiès, *Cuando éramos capitanes* (Barcelona, 1974), 119–20.

¹⁵'Sim', *Estampas de la revolución española 19 de julio 1936* (Barcelona, 1936). For a large collection of images of women during the war, see M. Nash, *Las mujeres en la guerra civil* (Salamanca, 1989).

girls stood about laughing'. A little later, *The Times* correspondent in Valencia reported with obvious alarm:

Corps of milicianas [militia-women] have been organized, and women, armed and aggressive, take their place in the front line with men. All that womanhood traditionally stands for is rapidly disappearing. Women of the proletariat are not at all perturbed by the fact that in the region held by the government scarcely a church is open, scarcely a priest dares appear in public.¹⁶

Tradition on one side, a revolutionary new woman on the other; the polarised images have some truth in them, but they are of course misleading, and deconstructing them can tell us a good deal both about women in the Spanish Civil War and about the changing nature of the war itself.

It is undoubtedly true that some Republican women during the war acquired a status in public life at every level that was very different from pre-war experience. Much the most visible and audible woman on the Republican side was Dolores Ibárruri, universally known as La Pasionaria.¹⁷ Before the war began she was already a member of the Central Committee of the rather small Spanish Communist Party, and had been a delegate to the Seventh Congress of the Third International in Moscow in 1935. She was also prominent in the international Popular Front organization Women Against War and Fascism, and was head of its Spanish section. In February 1936 she had been elected a deputy for Oviedo to the Spanish parliament. The war found her, then, an already very experienced and widely known politician. But her standing was transformed by her radio broadcast of 19 July 1936, when she appealed to the Spanish people to oppose the military rising and famously declared 'They shall not pass'.¹⁸ Her ability to rouse crowds and to launch heroic slogans made her the public embodiment of Republican resistance. Her voice and her face were everywhere. Both inside Spain and abroad, she came to represent the Republic in a way that its President and successive Prime Ministers never did, and a woman in any equivalent propaganda role on the insurgent side would have been unthinkable.

None of the other women Cortes deputies of the pre-war period

¹⁶ *The Times* 25 July 1936 and 4 August 1936. These are among the huge number of newspaper cuttings made for each day of the Civil War by the late Burnett Bolloten, and held in the Bolloten Collection at the Hoover Institution.

¹⁷ There is an autobiography, *They Shall Not Pass* (1966). Among numerous accounts of her life based on interview material, see A. Carabantes and E. Cimorra, *Un mito llamado Pasionaria* (Barcelona, 1982). Cimorra was a long-standing colleague in the Spanish Communist Party and in exile.

¹⁸ Text in *Speeches and Articles 1936-38*, 7-8.

attained anything like so high a profile. But the Anarchist leader Federica Montseny became the first female government minister in Spain, holding the post of Minister of Health in Largo Caballero's government (September 1936—May 1937). It is evident from recently-published memoirs, however, that at a lower level of political, propagandist, and union activity, the war propelled some young women into unprecedented and dizzying public responsibility. Hundreds of them joined political parties and youth groups, and plunged into organising food supplies and evening classes, writing articles, giving speeches, and maintaining communications with other groups and with the front. One of these, for whom the war—with all its agonies—was nonetheless a personal liberation, was Sara Berenguer.¹⁹ She was a seventeen-year-old seamstress in Barcelona when the war began, having left school at twelve. She immediately offered her services to the local revolutionary committee of her *barrio*, and in an Anarchist milieu she briefly joined a Socialist union by mistake because she did not know the difference between the two. From this naive beginning, she became active in the Libertarian Youth movement and later the Anarchist-feminist *Mujeres Libres*. She learnt to type, became a secretary and administrator for the revolutionary committee, gave classes to children, kept accounts, gave public talks and took part in debates, and generally developed her own ideas, independence, and expertise. In the course of all this exhausting work, she also gained the kind of new freedom of movement often reported by women in belligerent countries in the first World War: she could go out alone, work closely with men, return home by herself very late at night without anyone thinking it at all strange.²⁰ For her, defence of the Republic was the defence of freedom and opportunity, and when the Republic fell she had no choice but to go into a lifetime of exile.

Not all those who would curtail a woman's freedom were enemies of the Republic, however. Sara was furious to see a group of young men laughing at a poster advertising a talk to be given by a representative of *Mujeres Libres* because it seemed so amusing to them that a woman should dare give a public lecture. She made sure she attended it, and intervened at the end to defend the speaker, Conchita Guillén, from the contemptuous criticism of men in the audience. And over and over again she discovered that her Anarchist male colleagues assumed that any woman talking about freedom must mean she was freely

¹⁹ S. Berenguer, *Entre el sol y la tormenta: Treinta y dos meses de guerra (1936-1939)* (Barcelona, 1988).

²⁰ Berenguer, *Entre el sol y la tormenta* 44-51.

sexually available for them.²¹ Moreover she and Teresa Pamiès both give accounts of organised visits by young women militants to the front to take supplies, conversation, and entertainment to bored and frightened soldiers. And both discovered that the soldiers presumed they were coming to offer sex, and felt annoyed and cheated to learn differently.²²

The women's secretariat of the POUM (the dissident, anti-Stalinist Communist Party), published in Barcelona a few, fortnightly issues of a newspaper from February 1937 until just after the May crisis of the same year that marked the eclipse of political forces in the Republic that were resistant to the dominance of the Spanish Communist Party and its allies. Appropriately enough, the paper was called *Emancipación*, and concerned itself with women's roles within the social revolution that POUM was determined to promote along with and as the essential component of the defence of the Republic. Various articles lamented the fact that men in the POUM who were revolutionary in their politics had not changed their understanding of family and sexual relations. Too many men had not yet 'made the revolution in their homes', and were 'little dictators' who still treated their wives as 'useful only for housework and bearing children'. Too many wives could not get involved in political work because their husbands insisted they had to be home to produce meals promptly at stated times, and could not be allowed out of the house at night.²³ Dolores Ibárruri made the same point later in the war when addressing a regional conference of the Spanish Communist Party, destroyers of the POUM, in Madrid:

I have known many comrades who considered themselves great revolutionaries, but when I asked them, 'Why do you not get your wives to join the Party, why do you not see to it that your wives attend meetings?'—they would answer: 'My wife does not understand anything; she does not know anything; she has to look after the children.

Moreover, she pointed out that such men sometimes actively disapproved of their wives wanting to be involved in politics, which they themselves regarded as a male sphere.²⁴

Emancipation often did not get very far. Where entry to the labour market was concerned, the experience of Spanish women on the Republican side replicated in many ways that of women elsewhere

²¹ Berenguer, *Entre el sol y la tormenta* 114–15.

²² Berenguer, *Entre el sol y la tormenta* 173–4; Pamiès, *Cuando éramos capitanes* 54–5.

²³ 'Militante comunista dentro y fuera del hogar', *Emancipación* 15 March 1937; 'El Comunismo y la familia', *Emancipación* 29 May 1937.

²⁴ *Speeches and Articles* 188–91.

during the First World War. Women moved into kinds of paid employment that were new to them, most notably in transport and munitions. And the demand for them increased as Republican territory dwindled and new sectors of the male population were mobilized for the front: eventually, men from seventeen to fifty-five years old were conscripted. It was not always clear, however, that women were being employed in their own right. Preference was often given to the wives, daughters, and sisters of the men who usually held the post, and in October 1937 a government regulation made this preference official.²⁵ While some women argued that paid work was a right and not just a duty, and saw it as necessary for progress to independence and equality, many simply had to work in order to eat.²⁶ They were paid at lower rates than men, and rarely enjoyed posts of responsibility except in clothing industries, where women's work was long-established. Young, single women predominated, as before, strengthening the impression that paid work outside the home was essentially a temporary and conditional occupation for women. And male trade unionists were notoriously hostile to the employment of women in erstwhile 'male' jobs, and unconvinced that women could do 'equal' work and therefore merit equal pay. Dolores Ibárruri criticized Communist trade union leaders for seeing women in the workplace only as rivals, and one of her perorations about women and work has the tone of a vision for a different future rather than a projection of even partial present reality:

Our women will be liberated from domestic slavery and seclusion, to which arab values and Christian mysticism have consigned them. They will become free citizens, with the opportunity in the factory, the workshop, the school and the laboratory, to work, study, and do research along with men, with the same rights and duties.²⁷

Women were, however, encouraged to 'enlist in the work front' as well as to help the war effort in more traditional ways ranging from trying to relieve the enormous social problems created by the war to knitting winter jerseys for soldiers. What they were emphatically not encouraged to do after the first weeks of fighting was actually to carry arms and go to the front. The Communist Fifth Regiment had organized a women's battalion, but destined it for support work rather than front line combat. More and more emphasis was placed on getting women active at the home front, leaving the actual fighting

²⁵ J. Aróstegui (ed.), *Historia y Memoria de la Guerra Civil* (3 vols., Valladolid, 1988), ii, 163.

²⁶ Aróstegui, *Historia y Memoria* 163–4; M. Nash, *Mujer y movimiento obrero en España 1931–1939* (Barcelona, 1981), 106–7.

²⁷ *Speeches and Articles* 234, where the text is abbreviated; full text published separately under the title *Unión de todos los españoles* (Barcelona, no date), this quotation, 75.

to men. As the hastily-devised militias of the first stage of the war gradually gave way to more regular army discipline, women were edged out. Already in September 1936 Socialist Prime Minister Largo Caballero insisted that militia-women abandon the front. Much more dramatically than with admission to the modern labour force, women's participation in military action was seen as an emergency measure, a temporary expedient, which survived as a propagandist image of popular revolution well after it had virtually ceased to be social reality. Moreover, even the image was tarnished by the huge campaigns to alert soldiers to the dangers of venereal disease, many of which implied that women at the front were part of the problem.²⁸

Even at the front itself, women found it difficult to escape traditional expectations. Militia-woman Leonor Benito described doing guard-duty at night equally with men, yet still being expected to do the washing for them.²⁹ Mika Etchebéhère had the exceptional experience of being a captain in a POUM column at Sigüenza, north-east of Madrid. Significantly, she was chosen by male comrades to replace her husband, killed in the very first days of battle there. On one early occasion the men refused to take turns sweeping out the sleeping quarters, arguing that the four militia-women in the company should do it. A little later two more women arrived saying—according to Mika—that they were tired of doing the washing-up and cleaning in their Communist Party column and had heard that the POUM organised things differently and would permit them to use a gun. In November, in a different section of the Madrid front, a soldier who had voluntarily done a general sock-wash in the trenches remarked to her, 'Now I've seen everything. A woman commands the company and men wash the socks. This really is a revolution'.³⁰ An eye-witness at the front in Somosierra recalled meeting a young woman called Carmen who had come originally to help wash and repair clothes, but seeing men fall all round her had grabbed a gun and become a soldier instead. At the same time a group of five militia-women there seemed always busy because they did all the chores as well as their military duties.³¹ It seems often to have been the case that even when women were allowed to fight, they were expected to do a double shift, one with a gun, the other with a broom. Their removal back to the home front soon re-established the clear demarcation between what was a man's task and what a woman's.

²⁸ M. Nash, 'Milicianas and Home Front Heroines: Images of women in revolutionary Spain (1936–1939)', *Journal of the History of European Ideas* 1990.

²⁹ Aróstegui, *Historia y Memoria* ii. 159.

³⁰ M. Etchebéhère, *Ma guerre d'Espagne à moi* (Paris, 1976), 26, 58, 202.

³¹ S. Blasco, *Peuple d'Espagne, Journal de Guerre de la 'Madrecita'* (Paris, 1938), 86–90, 125–6.

In the Republican rearguard, it was political groups most directly committed to a view of the Civil War as social revolution that produced women's organisations and publications determined to shape a new status for women in Spain. Neither the Spanish Communist Party nor the Spanish Socialist Party—nor even for that matter the Unified Socialist (and Communist) Party of Catalonia paid much attention to the question of what women, as women, might expect to gain from victory. The Communists wanted to mobilise women, but for the military and political aims of the Party and the Popular Front. Dolores Ibárruri was exceptional in these circles in calling for a new assessment of the place of women in Spain, but her energies were primarily absorbed in Party and Popular Front activities. The immediate task was to win the war against 'the fascists', not to reconstruct Spanish society. The Communist-dominated Organization of Women Against Fascism mobilized Communist, Socialist, and Republican women to help the war effort behind the lines, but as its title indicates, it postponed for another day all other issues.³²

For this very reason, the Communist and Popular Front organisations were held in profound suspicion by Anarchist and POUM women for whom social revolution was not postponable. The contributors to POUM's *Emancipación* in its brief life distanced themselves both from bourgeois feminism, seen as trivial, and cross-class antifascism, seen as counter-revolutionary. They looked to a double emancipation, of the revolutionary proletariat from its capitalist enemies, and of women from gender subordination.³³

A similar line was taken by the Anarchist-feminist *Mujeres Libres*, but with a very much greater feminist emphasis. Only women contributed to and produced the lively, stylish paper, that had a longer life and far greater circulation than *Emancipación*. And behind the paper there existed a large network of *Mujeres Libres* groups, propagandists, literacy classes, vocational courses, and other activities. From a feminist perspective, *Mujeres Libres* was the most innovative and clear-headed women's organization in existence during the Civil War, although not all of its members or even leaders counted themselves as feminists. It fostered radical views on sexual and family relations, campaigned against the exploitation of women in prostitution, worked hard to further working-class women's interests through training courses in everything from typing to electrical skills, encouraged women to join trade unions and engage in political activity, and generally promoted the image and reality of a new, independent, trained, working woman. It disagreed both with the view that Anarch-

³² For Communist and Popular Front aims and organisations for women, see M. Nash, *Mujer y movimiento obrero* Chs 5 and 7.

³³ See especially various articles in *Emancipación* 29 May 1937.

ist women did not need an organisation separate from men, and with Popular Front women's movements that eschewed revolution.³⁴

But before the Republic lost the war to Franco, the POUM and the Anarchists had lost their own struggle within the Communist-dominated anti-fascist alliance, and been suppressed. The longer the war continued, the less the Republic represented any revolution in gender roles. And some revolutionary women even found their aspirations cruelly ended, not first by insurgent victories but by incarceration in Communist prisons behind the Republican lines.³⁵

It is nonetheless true that no sector on the Republican side shared the determination of the insurgents to return women to their traditional, domestic place. The Women's Section of the Spanish Fascist Party became, after Franco's forced unification of all political parties and movements in April 1937, the official women's movement of the emerging regime. Its leader Pilar Primo de Rivera had no doubt about a woman's place, which was in the family, as wife and mother. One might have expected that the women's section of a political movement that boasted of its revolutionary credentials would foster a more radical vision of a woman's place in the new order. But religious influences were always strong in the Women's Section, symbolized at the very beginning by the fact that its four founding members went off to a local church to recommend themselves and their new enterprise to Christ when launching the national women's movement at the end of 1934.³⁶ This religious spirit—very different from the at best indifference to orthodox Catholicism of many men in the Falange—was also apparent in the eighteen points chosen to guide the Women's Section after the unification of April 1937. Women were urged to lift their hearts to God each morning, to be obedient and disciplined, and to be content with lowly positions far from leadership.³⁷ More characteristically Falangist ideas and vocabulary also disappeared from the public rhetoric of the Women's Section as the war progressed. Pilar Primo de Rivera still referred to women having a place in unions and municipal life as well as in the family in a speech in Segovia in 1938,

³⁴The essential work on *Mujeres Libres* and their publications is M. Nash, *Mujeres Libres* (Barcelona, 1976). See M. Ackelsberg, including 'Mujeres Libres: Individuality and Community. Organizing Women during the Spanish Civil War', *Radical America* xviii. no. 4, 1984, 'Women and the Politics of the Spanish Popular Front: Political Mobilization or Social Revolution', *International Labour and Working-Class History* no. 30, 1986, and *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women* (Bloomington, 1991).

³⁵See for example K. Landau, *Le Stalinisme en Espagne. Témoignages de Militants Révolutionnaires sauvés des prisons stalinienne* (Paris, c. 1938).

³⁶M. T. Gallego Méndez, *Mujer, Falange y Franquismo* (Madrid, 1983), 29.

³⁷*Los 18 puntos de la mujer de F.E.T. y de las J.O.N.S.*, a single-sheet leaflet, in Hoover Institution Bolloten Collection, Box 53, Miscellaneous Documents vol. iv.

but by the end of the war her emphasis was entirely on women's work in the home, where 'we must ensure that the woman finds her whole life, and the man his rest and relaxation'.³⁸ Over and over again she insisted that women were subordinate to men, should never compete with them, and that men, not women were called to govern.³⁹ Moreover, since in the war soldiers, and Carlist and Falangist volunteers fought at the front while women did not, only they should have a say in decision-making.⁴⁰ At a rally of 11,000 members of the Women's Section at Medina del Campo in May 1939 to honour Franco and the victorious army, she put the whole argument into one simple statement, 'The only mission assigned to women in the nation's great enterprise (la tarea de la patria) is the home'.⁴¹

There was something inescapably paradoxical about a woman addressing thousands of people in great public gatherings, and taking as her constant theme the need for women to concentrate all their energies on husbands, home, and children. The paradox was especially obvious when, among her bizarre exhortations to women to teach children Christmas carols to sing around the crib, or regional dances from other parts of Spain to enhance national unity, she expressed her distaste for women who aspired to a public role, and for the 'detestable type of the female orator'.⁴² Her own resolution of the paradox was to argue that only exceptional circumstances had brought women out of their homes to help rescue the country in its need. Peace would restore the priorities of domestic normality.⁴³

But just as the radical images, and feminist aspirations and innovations released on the Republican side could not cancel out traditional gender relations,⁴⁴ so the rhetoric of traditionalism could not negate changes wrought by the war even on the victorious side. Pilar herself recognized in 1939 that 'customs have changed completely in Spain. Women now have much more liberty than they had before'.⁴⁵ Behind the insurgent lines too, women had been mobilised on a grand scale into war work, although mainly into medical, food, and other relief services. If the Women's Section of the Falange had opened the way here, the essential organisation was Auxilio Social, (Social Aid),

³⁸ P. Primo de Rivera, *Escritos. Discursos, circulares, escritos* (Madrid, c. 1943), 13, 26–7.

³⁹ E.g., *Escritos* 37.

⁴⁰ *Escritos* 15.

⁴¹ *Escritos* 65.

⁴² *Escritos* 36.

⁴³ *Escritos* 15.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of the reasons why wartime challenges to gender relations usually have very limited results, see S. Macdonald, 'Drawing the lines—gender, peace and war: an introduction', in S. Macdonald, P. Holden, and S. Ardener (eds.), *Images of Women in Peace and War: Cross-cultural and Historical Perspectives* (1987).

⁴⁵ *Escritos* 22. See also F. Farmborough, *Life and People in National Spain* (1938), 31.

founded in October 1936 by Mercedes Sanz Bachiller 'for the definite purpose of fighting hunger, cold and misery'.⁴⁶

The patron of Social Aid was the Virgin of San Lorenzo, but it had a very dramatic emblem, a bare arm thrusting a dagger down the throat of a dragon that represented the raging ills it was designed to remedy. And its scale of operation was dramatic too. After beginning as a local variant on German Winter Aid, providing free meals for children in the Valladolid area in the winter of 1936–7, it expanded rapidly, helped by government backing. In February 1937 it was established in every liberated province and authorised to hold street collections in which the collectors were 'the young ladies affiliated to the Falange',⁴⁷ as well as other fund-raising initiatives. Social Aid lorries followed troops into towns and villages won from the Republic, and the women ran food kitchens and centres to look after war orphans. Thousands of women participated, and a propaganda booklet claimed, probably accurately, that at the height of its wartime activity in late 1938, it dispensed about ten million meals per month to adults and children.⁴⁸

There were numerous men directors of Social Aid, not least because Mercedes Sanz Bachiller wanted it to have the prestige virtually to constitute the Social Welfare system of the new state. But it retained close if sometimes uneasy ties with the Women's Section of the Falange, and acted as the agency of female mobilisation behind the insurgent lines. Franco defined in a decree of 7 October 1937, feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, the service women must offer to the country. Women aged 17 to 35 were to complete a period of six months' social service in the institutions run by Social Aid. It is worth noting that widows with at least one child still in their care were exempted, but that married women were exempted by that circumstance alone, regardless of whether they had children. And any woman eligible for service who did not complete it and gain a validating certificate, was debarred from entry into the professions or jobs in the state or local government bureaucracy.⁴⁹

After the war, women's continuing social service was placed directly under the Women's Section of the Falange, which was given responsibility for the political and social formation of Spanish women.⁵⁰ In schools, colleges, orphanages, and training centres, the courses and propaganda of the Women's Section became an inescapable fact of

⁴⁶ *Auxilio Social. Social Help*, propaganda booklet in English, (Valladolid, c. Dec. 1938).

⁴⁷ *Legislación Española*, i. part 1, 244–6.

⁴⁸ *Auxilio Social. Social Help*.

⁴⁹ *Legislación Española*, iii. 22–4.

⁵⁰ M. T. Gallego Méndez, *Mujer, Falange y Franquismo*, 62–9.

life for a long generation of Spanish women. It is instructive to note that along with awareness of the stress on domesticity and motherhood, many who experienced the training courses acknowledged that they also contained promotional elements, channeling energies and fostering leadership.⁵¹ Mobilisation for service, for the home, and for political conformity was, nevertheless, mobilisation, and the whole immense system of Social Aid and the Women's Section bore the same kind of paradox exemplified in Pilar Primo de Rivera denouncing public power for women while exercising a form of it herself.

Behind the lines on both sides in the Spanish Civil War, more radical visions of what a woman might do were tamed: on Republican territory, Anarchist and POUM aspirations were swamped by the very different priorities of the Popular Front coalition from the spring of 1937 onwards; in Rebel Spain, what interest there was in a Fascist new woman succumbed to more widespread conservative values rooted in religious traditionalism.⁵² In this way, the history of women's roles during the war replicates very accurately the political history in the two zones.

Moreover, it is possible to argue that where women were concerned, the antithesis between the two sides was far from complete. One of the Republican womens' organisations that aroused enormous scorn and anger in conservative circles in pro-Franco Spain was the Basque Nationalist *Emakumes*. Its members become involved in active propaganda as well as support services before and during the war, and it promoted women's politicisation and opposition to the military rising, but its fundamental inspiration was undoubtedly as much Catholic as Basque Nationalist or Republican.⁵³ Moreover, gender roles were on the whole not revolutionised behind Republican lines, and even triumphant traditionalism could not negate the new public duties, responsibilities and mobility experienced by so many women supporters of Franco. Indeed, there were extraordinary transpositions of value across the great divides of war and ideology, as for instance in the conviction held by POUM military captain Mika Etchebéhère that in order to earn the respect of her male revolutionary comrades at the front, she must observe a scrupulous chastity. She decided she had to be pure and tough, a woman not like other women, on a

⁵¹ E.g., in L. Falcón's biographical prologue to C. Alcalde, *La mujer en la guerra civil española* (Madrid, 1976).

⁵² See Pilar Primo de Rivera's speech to the women of the Basque Provinces and Navarre, defending the Sección Femenina from accusations by Carlist women—*margaritas*—that it was not properly Catholic and incorporated nothing from their Traditionalism, *Escritos* 57–64.

⁵³ For a classic account see P. de Larrañaga, *Emakume Abertzale Batza. La mujer en el nacionalismo vasco* (3 vols., Donostia, 1978).

pedestal, and it is difficult to resist the comparison with the religious iconography of statues of the Virgin Mary.⁵⁴

The differences, however, remained so fundamental, that the victory of the Rebel generals in the spring of 1939 necessarily settled the question for many, many years, of what women would be and would do in Spain. They should be wives and mothers, or nuns; they would be, officially at least, religious; their sphere would be domestic rather than public; and they would be subordinate. On both sides in the war there were mythologies of woman to be transformed into social convention, or—in the terminology of Roland Barthes—images that might transform contingent history into nature.⁵⁵ But to determine through law and language and imagery what should be perceived as natural, the battle of history had to be won first. The Spanish Civil War had a clear, unconditional victor.

⁵⁴M. Etchebéhère, *Ma guerre d'Espagne à Moi*, 148–9, 176, 189, 218.

⁵⁵R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (London, 1973), 129.