

Creating Spaniards: Culture and National Identity in Republican Spain

by Sandie Holguín
University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.

By Sebastiaan Faber

For the progressive Spanish bourgeoisie, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were intensely frustrating. Generation after generation, its vision of a modern, Republican Spanish democracy was thwarted by the conservative bloc that dominated national political life.

For the forward-looking middle classes—whose main center was the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza*, founded in 1876 as a secular island in a paltry educational system monopolized by the Catholic Church—what Spain needed above all was “culture,” understood as a mix of modern civilization, cultural literacy, and conscious citizenship, to be brought about by education.

“Culture” implied a sense of organic wholeness or social health through which Spain could come into its own as a national community, integrate into Europe, and regain its rightful place at the forefront of nations. The *institucionistas* were strongly influenced by the German philosopher Krause, who in turn was heavily indebted to romanticism. The Krausist middle-class intellectuals admired the Spanish folk, which in their opinion harbored the energy and resources necessary for national regeneration; but they also believed that the *pueblo* needed to be put back in touch with its own cultural heritage—a heritage that fortunately had been preserved in Spain’s masterpieces of art and literature.

Educating the *pueblo*, therefore,

meant teaching them to consume and appreciate a “high” culture that was really the folk’s to begin with. While the Krausists realized that modernization also implied political, economic, and agricultural reform, at bottom they believed Spain’s problem to be “spiritual,” and that it could only be adequately addressed through the leadership of an enlightened class of educators.

When the ailing system finally collapsed in April 1931 and the Second Republic was proclaimed, these intellectuals found themselves at the helm of the nation. Against tremendous national and international odds, they immediately began implementing an ambitious program to infuse Spain with the cultural elixir necessary for its regeneration. Sandie Holguín’s *Creating Spaniards* provides a detailed assessment of the Republicans’ efforts to educate, unite, and modernize Spain from 1931 through the end of the Civil War.

Holguín focuses on the so-called *misiones pedagógicas*, the teams of educators who traveled the Spanish countryside to teach, perform plays, and create schools and libraries in an attempt to bring even the remotest, most disadvantaged communities into the national fold. Holguín argues that these educational programs, which especially flourished under the Republican-Socialist governments of 1931-33, were guided by a clear notion of Spanish nationhood (albeit a Castile-centric one); that, in their effort to “shape a national identity that was held together by the glue of culture,” they were inspired by educational programs of revolutionary Mexico and the USSR;

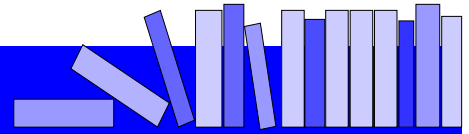
and that they accomplished a great deal, despite strong resistance from the right, the radical left, and the regionalists.

Holguín makes clear, however, that the Republican leadership was unable to overcome the contradictions between its own centralist bias and the demands of Catalan and Basque nationalism, or between its own reformist attitude (and the top-down structure inherent in its self-appointed educational mission) and the revolutionary goals of the Socialist and Anarchist rank and file.

Finally, Holguín shows there was a tragically quixotic dimension to the Republicans’ attempt to lead Spain into modernity through a program based on nineteenth-century notions of cultural literacy based on literature and a “cult of reading.” Especially striking in this respect is the Republicans’ almost religious faith in the redeeming and unifying potential of “high” culture, particularly Spanish Golden Age theater. Holguín argues that this traditional, bookish bias prevented the Republican elites from appreciating the potential of film as a medium.

The strength of this book lies in the detail with which it describes the work of the *misiones pedagógicas* and related projects such as García Lorca’s traveling theater: we learn what towns they visited, what they presented, and how both their audiences and the press reacted to their efforts. The book contains some wonderful archival photos as well. This work’s greatest weakness is its lack of precise political contextualization.

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The Finns in Spain

Meidan Poikamme Espanjassa [Our Boys in Spain]. Edited by K. E. Heikkinen (Finnish Workers Federation, 1939, 96 pp.) Translated by Matti A. Mattson, 2002.

By Peter Carroll

The 350 or so Finns who served in the International Brigades built a fine record of courage, commitment, and valor that is still exhilarating to discover in this recently translated and reprinted booklet. Originally published in 1939, it was put into English by Lincoln vet Matti Mattson. It stands today as a compelling documentary history of one ethnic group's participation in the Spanish Civil War.

The Finnish volunteers went to Spain from Canada and the United States, as well as from their native land, and saw action in nearly every battle from Jarama in January 1937 through the Sierra Pandols twenty months later. They served in the 15th Brigade (both with the Lincoln-Washington and MacKenzie Papeneau battalions), the 11th Brigade (German), and in many other units, including the medical corps, artillery, transportation, and guerrilla groups. Within the 15th Brigade, there were two predominantly Finnish machine gun companies: Toivo Antikainen with the Lincolns and Ilkkan-Toivo Antikainen among the Mac-Paps. Brigade leaders also chose a disproportionate number of Finns to fight with guerrilla units behind enemy lines. Their experiences in Spain provide a cross-section of the history of the IBs.

Here in simple, understated prose, and with memories fresh from action in 1939, the ex-soldiers

describe the face of combat, the split-second luck of survival, the stunned agony of injury and death, and the daily fortitude that kept their spirits alive. Carl Syvanen, for instance, tells in a matter of fact way how he and another frightened soldier accidentally captured 25 fully armed fascists at Brunete. "After that," he says, "we were more careful of entering houses of which we knew nothing."

There is much information woven through these personal narratives. Frank Rogers gives an eyewitness account of the fascist breakthrough near Belchite in 1938, depicting the deaths of Commissar Dewitt Parker and Battalion Commander David Reiss when a fascist shell scored a direct hit on

battalion headquarters. Bill Aalto's memoir of partisan warfare—one of three such accounts in this work—describes the difficulties of guerrilla warfare as the fascists learned to anticipate Republican tactics. Simo Kavhu's "A Sketch of Life in a Concentration Camp in Democratic France" still sets the reader's teeth grinding in frustration.

This is a modest but captivating volume. We applaud Matti Mattson for making it available to English readers.

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It never stops to explain the political history of the Republic from 1931 to 1936, and there is barely any mention of the *bienio negro*, the two years of conservative rule preceding the February 1936 elections.

As a result, the reader might get the mistaken impression that the Republicans' pre-war progressive reforms lasted five years, or that their cultural work was done in a political vacuum. And while Holguín goes to great lengths to clarify the different educational views of Republicans, Socialists, Anarchists, and the right, her overall use of political terms such as "Republican" or "revolutionary" is vague and confusing. (Communist policy during the Civil War, for instance, can hardly be called "revolutionary.")

Finally, the book could have been better edited. Some passages

are repetitious, and the text is marred by some unfortunate stylistic and factual slips (Juan Negrín, for example, was not a Communist [173]; CNT does not stand for "Confederación Nacional del Trabajado" [29, 172], etc.).

Nevertheless, *Creating Spaniards* is an important study that helps explain how the Republicans' faith in "culture" as a cure for Spain's many problems spawned an unprecedented and relatively successful educational project that was not, however, without its limitations. ■

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