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Author(s): Michael Seidman

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The Artist as Populist: Hemingway and the Spanish Civil War

Michael Seidman

NO ONE DID more than Ernest Hemingway to bring the Spanish Civil War to the attention of the American people. As a script writer, Hemingway conveyed the Loyalist message both to the general public and to political and intellectual elites. His film, *The Spanish Earth* (1937), was screened in movie houses, in private showings before Hollywood celebrities and before President and Mrs. Roosevelt. As newspaper reporter, short-story writer and novelist, he reached even wider audiences. His book, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), captivated a mass readership. By the end of 1943, cumulative sales figures had reached 785,000 in the United States alone plus another 100,000 in Great Britain, thus making the work the biggest seller in American fiction since *Gone With the Wind*.¹ Like the latter, Hollywood made it into a major movie. Thus, it could be argued that if Americans know anything about the Spanish Civil War, they probably know it from Hemingway.

Like almost everything significant concerning the conflict, Hemingway's works on the Spanish Civil War are controversial. If some have argued that *The Spanish Earth* is a great classic, others have seen it as a piece of Communist propaganda. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* has provoked even greater debate. A number of important critics have concluded that the novel constituted Hemingway's greatest artistic achievement, marking his return as a genuine artist devoted not, as in the case of the film, to a specific cause or ideology but rather to the real artistic goal of telling the truth. Others, myself included, are more inclined to see the limits of the novel. While *For Whom the Bell Tolls* reflects a more mature understanding of the Spanish Civil War, the novel is nonetheless marred by a continuing populism and a lingering Stalinism.² Whatever their virtues or faults, Hemingway's fictional and nonfic-

¹Kenneth S. Lynn, *Hemingway* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 484.

²His defenders include Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 237; Frederick R. Benson, *Writers in Arms: The Literary Impact of the Spanish Civil War* (New York, 1967), 42; Jeffrey Meyers, *Hemingway: A Biography* (New York: New York University Press, 1985), 342; Lynn, *Hemingway*, 491-97. For more critical assessments, see Dwight MacDonald, *Discriminations* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 279-84; José Luis Castillo-Puche, *Hemingway in Spain*, tr. Helen R. Lane (New York: Grossman, 1974).

tional works reveal his search for community during the Popular Front of the late 1930s. The author was not alone in his search and was part of a movement of committed Western intellectuals who defended the Spanish Republic. For them, the Republic was not merely a matter of parliamentary democracy or progressive economic and social reforms but was essentially a populist community.

“The people” would be the key concept for Hemingway when he wrote about the Spanish Civil War. The populism of both *The Spanish Earth* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* derives not just from Hemingway’s democratic American background, but from his own success in appealing to a segment of the mass market during the interwar period. Unlike his former mentor, Ezra Pound, Hemingway never exhibited an elitist disdain for the mass audience or the masses themselves. He was fond of mass leisure and culture, especially of sports and movie stars. He became a celebrity who was infatuated with folk culture, especially Spanish bullfights. Given his commitment to the people and their culture in its mass and folk forms, it is hardly surprising that in February 1937, a few weeks before his first visit to war-torn Spain, he admitted to a Catholic friend, “I know that they’ve [poor people] have [sic] shot priests and bishops but why was the church in politics on the side of the oppressors instead of for the people—or instead of not being in politics at all? ... My sympathies are always for exploited working people against absentee landlords.”³ In the same vein, he wrote to his Catholic mother-in-law: “The Reds may be as bad as they say,” but “they are the people of the country.” In his eyes, the war was a struggle between them and “the absentee landlords, the Moors, the Italians and the Germans.” Thus, even before he saw the war for himself, he conceived of the struggle as one between the Spanish people and the elites backed by their foreign supporters.

It is in this context that the history of the making of *The Spanish Earth* must be understood. In early 1937, Hemingway joined leftist American intellectuals—John Dos Passos, Archibald MacLeish, and Lillian Hellman—to form a company called Contemporary Historians with the goal of making an antifascist film. To shoot the film, Hemingway collaborated with Joris Ivens, a Dutch filmmaker close to the Communist Party, whom he met in Paris in March 1937. *The Spanish Earth* was completed in Spain by April. The film is the purest example of Hemingway’s populism, which was the stylistic soulmate of Ivens’ socialist realism. Both forms combined the themes of war and work into an aesthetically compatible whole. Although thematically and iconographically similar to socialist realism, populism was more ecumenical and more appropriate to the period of the Popular Front. Instead of limiting itself to the wage-earning class, populism stressed the heterogeneous social composition of “the people.” At the same time, it exhibited their political unity. It also painted the Spaniards as diligent and industrious.

³Carlos Baker, ed., *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters, 1917–1961* (New York: Scribner, 1981), 456–58.

The opening lines of *The Spanish Earth* introduce the main characters, who are the villagers of Fuentedueña. They are first depicted as workers who labor “for the common good.” They are intent upon completing an irrigation project, which the reactionary enemy has obstructed for generations. To complete the project, the peasants—who are identified as “men who only wanted to work and fight”—must battle the enemy for control of their land. At the end of the documentary they combat the Rebels as the water flows down the newly dug irrigation ditches. The unity of war and work in the populist community is demonstrated.

The film shows that these peasants were not alone in their struggle for the Republic; rather the entire Spanish people unite in its defense: Lawyers, athletes, bullfighters, and bookkeepers join the democratic Popular Army. In contrast, their adversaries are referred to, not as Nationalists, but as Rebels, a word with largely negative civil-war connotations for an American audience. The Republican Loyalists are civilians who have taken up arms against a rebel force largely composed of professional soldiers and foreigners. Republicans are capable and talented; their leaders are Hispanic Horatio Algiers and products of the democratic meritocracy. For example, Enrique Lister, a stone mason, entered the Popular Army as a simple soldier and rose to a division commander. José Díaz had worked twelve hours per day before he was elected to Parliament. La Pasionaria, “the wife of a poor miner in Asturias,” became “the most famous woman in Spain” and one of its greatest orators.

In the film, the Spanish people are not revolutionary. Neither collectivization of property nor sexual experimentation exists. Instead, Republicans are family-oriented. Julian, the young Republican soldier from the village of Fuentedueña, faithfully writes home to his parents. When on leave, he visits his native village both to see his mother and father and to train village boys for the fight. Other soldiers are loving husbands and fathers whom the conflict separates from their dear ones. Republicans are dedicated to the cause but are not blinded by hatred. The people save art treasures which fascist bombings have endangered. Important artists—such as the German writer, Gustav Regler, and not lost on the viewing audience, Ernest Hemingway himself—confirm the popular commitment to culture.

Ostensibly devoted to the cause of the Spanish people, *The Spanish Earth* was a political (basically Communist) propaganda film. It ignored the revolution in large parts of the Republican zone, presented the Marxist-oriented Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT) as the only union, and omitted any mention of popular anti-clericalism or church burnings. The film argued the Communist line during the Popular Front, which defined the war as a struggle to defend the legally constituted Republic against fascism. It refused to acknowledge the existence of parties and unions on the Republican side which fought for a collectivist revolution. The documentary attempted to convince its audience that the Spanish people were diligent,

talented, and family-oriented, qualities which Americans could easily admire. It offered a picture of a democratic and progressive (but nonrevolutionary) Republic.

The Spanish Earth was a significant documentary, but only one of Hemingway's minor works on the conflict. His major effort, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, presents the historian with a more difficult analytical task than *The Spanish Earth*. It is a novel, and it would be philistine to expect it to mirror faithfully events in every detail. The novelist, though, has the responsibility of understanding the historical context in which he imagines his story and of conveying an accurate picture of the whole. Although *For Whom the Bell Tolls* reveals a more subtle and sophisticated comprehension of the civil war than its cinematic predecessor, it remains flawed by a residual Stalinism and an unreflective populism.

The story focuses on a Loyalist guerrilla band in the Sierra de Guadarrama. For three days in May 1937, the partisan group cooperates with an American anti-fascist volunteer, Robert Jordan, who arrives with orders from Madrid to blow up a bridge to assist a massive Loyalist offensive. The story is told with great skill, but Hemingway's populism prevents adequate attention to politics. While he openly discusses the faults and virtues of the Communist line which was concealed in *The Spanish Earth*, his treatment remains insufficient. He does show that the partisan band was acting under Communist orders. Robert Jordan had "accepted their discipline for the duration of the war because, in the conduct of the war they were the only party whose program and whose discipline he could respect" (163). Yet Jordan is not a Communist, but a good Popular Frontist who identifies with the Western democratic tradition, especially with its American variation. He has special reverence for his grandfather (like Hemingway's own) who fought for the Union in the American Civil War. Although Jordan is clearly defined, the political affiliation of the Spanish *guerrilleros* in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* remains as obscure as that of the villagers of Fuentedueña in *The Spanish Earth*. Hemingway defines his fighters largely as "anti-fascists" and Republicans who generally resist the sectarianism of national politics. His heroes and heroines—Robert Jordan, Andrés, Anselmo, and Pilar—are unselfishly devoted to a populist community. Rather than engage in divisive politics, they perform their duties to the cause.

The novel implies that Spanish partisans arose spontaneously from a popular desire to save the Republic. It ignores that they were generally associated with the Communist Party and, in fact, usually directed by that organization. In other words, *guerrilleros* were more of the Party than the people. They were often trained and directed by the Soviet NKVD (People's Commissariat for International Affairs) in Loyalist Spain.⁴ Spanish partisans seemed to have acted more like commando

⁴Barton Whaley, *Guerrillas in the Spanish Civil War* (Detroit, 1969); Michael Alpert, *El ejército republicano en la guerra civil* (Paris and Barcelona: Iberia de Ediciones y Publicaciones, 1977), 292. Cf. Angel Capellán, *Hemingway and the Hispanic World* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 246–56, who argues, like Hemingway, for the spontaneity of the guerrilla movement. Capellán also ignores the socialist realist aspects of *The Spanish Earth*.

raiders stationed in friendly territory than leaders of guerrilla bands composed of Spanish irregulars living behind enemy lines. Soviet scholars have tended to discount the significance of guerrilla action in Spain because it did not represent a mass movement, but instead consisted of “diversionist” groups sent into enemy territory for specific purposes.⁵ Since partisan warfare was not self-sustaining and was largely Communist-inspired, it ceased when the NKVD withdrew from Spain.

Thus it is somewhat unsettling to the historian that the artist has focused his attention on guerrilla warfare because guerrilla activity was relatively unimportant during the Spanish Civil War. This war, unlike its Napoleonic or Carlist predecessors, saw little partisan fighting of the type that Hemingway described. The correct focus, at least for the scholar, might not be on the few guerrilla activities that occurred during the war but rather on the reasons why guerrillas, the historical symbol of Spanish popular rebellion, were not a major factor in the conflict.

According to a Spanish author who was Hemingway’s friend, the particular guerrilla activity upon which Hemingway centered his novel seems to have never existed:

There had been no guerrilla forces, either large groups or small isolated bands, operating in this sector during the war.... I had often questioned forest rangers, highway workers, peasants in little villages in the *sierra*, men who had fought on both sides during the war, and none of them could recall any situation even remotely similar to that in the novel.... Soldiers and officers of every rank had all agreed that there had been no such infiltration and sabotage by small bands of guerrillas in this sector.⁶

In fact, many—particularly those on the extreme Left (members of the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista [POUM] and anarchists)—have criticized the Republic for its failure to organize guerrilla warfare on a massive scale and have argued that had the Left done so, it might have been spared defeat. Some have blamed the Communists for deemphasizing guerrilla activity in favor of a regular army.

Yet on this issue the Communists cannot serve as scapegoats. As has been noted, they did organize some of the few guerrilla activities which existed. The ineffectiveness of partisan fighting reflects not so much the inadequacy of Communist strategy, but rather the apathy of the Spanish peasants and villagers, a subject which is largely ignored in both *The Spanish Earth* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Not only were peasants unenthusiastic about participation in partisan actions, but in a

⁵John A. Armstrong, ed., *Soviet Partisans in World War II* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 12.

⁶Castillo-Puche, *Hemingway*, 309–10.

number of cases they refused to feed the *guerrilleros* and went so far as to denounce them to the authorities.⁷ Peasant support for irregulars in the countryside was usually a local reaction to unwise and unwarranted incidents of Nationalist repression.⁸ One guerrilla fighter who left a diary of his experiences from July 1940 to February 1941 shows that his most difficult problem was acquiring food from the always suspicious and potentially traitorous peasants and workers.⁹ Hemingway is unable to deal with these problems from his populist perspective. In fact, he paints a portrait of a band that is supported by the surrounding countryside, which provides it with ample quantities of information, food, wine, and even whiskey. Furthermore, this band—like a B-grade American war movie—is an improbable cross-section of the people. Pablo, its former leader, was a horse trader. His gypsy spouse, Pilar, who takes over effective leadership of the group when Jordan arrives, had been a prostitute. Other important members—Anselmo, Andrés, Agustín—are Castilian peasants. As Spanish critics have remarked, it is highly unlikely that Castilian peasants would have accepted the leadership of a horse trader and a gypsy tart.¹⁰

Hemingway's populist community includes gypsies and women but it excludes anarchists. The libertarians represent the indisciplined, destructive, and bloodthirsty side of the people. They are thieves (236) and "fake soldiers" (247) and generally cowardly and unprincipled. The author reiterates the unsubstantiated report that their leader, Durruti, was murdered by his own men because he ordered them to attack (370). Anarchist personal habits are disgusting. "Foul and dirty" (377), these indisciplined and infantile soldiers were incapable of burying the fecal matter that they left in the trenches.

Of course, this portrait of anarchists is caricatural and reflects residual Stalinist influence on the author. Whatever one thinks of the viability of anarchism, the libertarian movement in Spain was a multifaceted mass movement which cannot be reduced to gangs of robbers, cowards, and pigs. Anarchists and anarchosyndicalists controlled, at least in its upper echelons, the largest trade union in Spain, the CNT. In general, they were no more cowardly, smelly, or indisciplined than Communists or Republicans. To attack them as divisive and pusillanimous during May 1937 is merely to repeat Communist propaganda which others, for instance, George Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), have convincingly denounced.

Yet it would be incorrect to say that Hemingway attributes all the failings of the people to the anarchists. He can also be very harsh about individual Commu-

⁷Alpert, *Ejército*, 294.

⁸Alexander Orlov, *Handbook of Intelligence and Guerrilla Warfare* (Ann Arbor, 1972), 164–84.

⁹Francisco Pérez López, *A Guerrilla Diary of the Spanish Civil War*, tr. Joseph D. Harris (London, 1972).

¹⁰Arturo Barea, "Not Spain but Hemingway," in Carlos Baker, ed., *Hemingway and His Critics: An International Anthology* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), 204; Castillo-Puche, *Hemingway*, 293, agrees that the band strains credibility.

nists who fail in their duties to the populist community. In the novel, Hemingway derides the documentary's heroine and hero, La Pasionaria and Enrique Lister. The former is portrayed as a mendacious propagandist and the latter as a phony working-class leader. André Marty, a Communist official in the International Brigades, is depicted as an insane butcher of dedicated Loyalists.

If Hemingway made a real effort to expose what he saw as Communist duplicity, he never made a profound critique of Communism. Unlike anarchists, Communists remained part of the people's community. His disagreements were with individuals, not policies. Robert Jordan reflects upon his experiences at Gaylord's, the Soviet headquarters in Madrid:

It was at Gaylord's that you learned that Valentín González, called El Campesino or The Peasant, had never been a peasant but was an ex-sergeant in the Spanish Foreign Legion.... That was all right too.... You had to have these peasant leaders quickly in this sort of war.... So you had to manufacture one. (229)

Although Jordan reveals Communist lies and distortions, he never asks why the Party felt it necessary to fabricate phony "worker and peasant leaders" if real ones had existed in sufficient numbers. Perhaps the fabrications were a response to the lack of peasant support for the Party and even for the Loyalist cause. The failure to take his criticisms of the Stalinists to their logical conclusions is also apparent in the treatment of André Marty, which many critics (both right and left) have seen as evidence of Hemingway's definitive break with Communism.¹¹ Stalinist executions are blamed on this lone mad executioner who has lost the support of his immediate subordinates, the common soldiers. They betray him to the good Communists who have Stalin's ear and who prevent Marty from carrying out his evil deeds. The Party's excesses—actions against anarchists, Communist dissidents of the POUM (whom the good Communist Karkov called "crackpots and wildmen"), and others—are largely attributed to the insanity of one man, thereby excusing the Party itself of responsibility for assassinations and disappearances in the Loyalist zone. Yet it is unclear why the Communists would tolerate a mad butcher like Marty in a position of such authority and influence. Marty's power contradicts Jordan's earlier claim that the Communists offered the best wartime discipline—for how could an efficient and reliable organization permit a psychopath to lead Communist soldiers in the International Brigades?

¹¹Non-Communists have praised the author's portrayal of Marty. Communists, such as Alvah Bessie and Enrique Lister, have attacked it. See Alvah Bessie, "Review of FWBT," in Carlos Baker, ed., *Ernest Hemingway: Critiques of Four Major Novels* (New York: Scribner, 1962), 90–94; Enrique Lister, *Nuestra Guerra* (Paris: 1966), 227.

The author's treatment of popular vengeance in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, like his analysis of Communism, represents an advance over his previous work but is nonetheless disappointing. Unlike *The Spanish Earth*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* does show unsanitized popular anticlericalism and vengeance. A good number of Hemingway scholars have argued that the most powerful scene in the novel is Pilar's tale of the massacre of the priest and the fascists in her village. Although drunken anarchists participated, the organizer of the carnage was Pablo, the once brave leader of the guerrilla band. The popular violence, orchestrated by Pablo, is just too savage and brutal to provoke sympathy from the reader.

In this episode Hemingway's populism again distorts his story. He sees the people as barbaric, but still the people. In other words, the Spanish villagers act in unison. The entire village participates in the massacre, which Hemingway portrays as a kind of bullfight with fascists replacing the bulls. Spanish critics have objected to his depiction of the mass involvement of the village population in the collective murders. One critic argues convincingly that Hemingway exaggerated the scale of village massacres and posits that the assassinations of the "fascists" would have been much less public and more discreet.¹² Another has asserted that "there were no such cases of mass slaughter in towns in Segovia. Nor were there any around Avila."¹³ The massacres which were most similar to the one that Pilar recounted occurred not in Castile but in Andalusia, a region with a quite different pattern of property distribution and class tensions. Hemingway may have heard rumors about popular massacres in Andalusia and inappropriately applied these examples to Castile. The author was again overly influenced by his real expertise on bullfighting and used the metaphor of the *corrida* in an arena where it was inapplicable. Disgruntled individuals from the lower classes and, more likely, militants of political parties and trade unions were responsible for multiple murders, but their actions may not have reflected the beliefs and attitudes of the "people."

Hemingway's populism was compatible with the Stalinist line of the Popular Front. Like the Party, the artist viewed the Civil War as a struggle between the Spanish people and their foreign and domestic enemies. His commitment to the people reflected his own ease in mass culture. He demonstrated an ability to capture a segment of the mass market by selling to an English-language audience his version of Spanish folklore, whether in the form of a bullfight or a guerrilla war. During the Popular Front, his interest in popular culture became linked to his search for community. In a period of economic depression and the rise of fascism, he sensed that his mass readership would also be sympathetic to his portrait of the hardworking and democratic Spanish people fighting together for a progressive Republic.

¹²Barea, "Not Spain," 206.

¹³Castillo-Puche, *Hemingway*, 128; on the improbability of the rape of Maria, see also p. 131.