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The nursing vocation as political participation for women during the Spanish Civil War

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Abstract

This article is centred on an analysis of women in the Spanish Civil War, with particular emphasis on their role as nurses. The purpose is to provide an alternative approach to the Spanish Civil War by moving away from the typical examination of the conflict as fought between two homogeneous factions and concentrating on a broader ideological spectrum. The speed with which nurses were trained by institutions such as the Spanish Red Cross and the different trade unions that collaborated with the Government of the Republic gives us a relevant sample of the different approaches to the notion of vocation. The vocation of the women of the Red Cross and of the nurses of Mujeres Libres (the Anarchist Women's Association) will be examined so as to establish the relationship between these practices and the moral stance that originated in the nursing principles of the nineteenth century. Whereas the virtues of Red Cross nurses were defined by values such as self-sacrifice and Christian charity, the Mujeres Libres nurses included a social commitment to revolutionary change and their vocation was founded on the principle of work and had nothing to do with the charity of the religious orders. Finally, the analysis of this concept of vocation in nursing will be seen not only as moral behaviour (ethos), but also as passion (pathos), thus revealing the different political options facing Spanish women during the Spanish Civil War.

Keywords

Spanish Civil War
 women's history
 science and politics
 history of nursing
 nursing vocation

Nurses: an alternative narrative for the Spanish Civil War

The wars of the first half of the twentieth century were significant factors in propelling women into the workforce. These conflicts meant that women were needed to take the place of the men who had been sent to the front. The Spanish Civil War gave women an opportunity that had been denied them for centuries and allowed them to experience the kind of liberty felt by other European and North American women during the Great War. Certain changes during the Second Republic had paved the way, such as women's suffrage, women's acquisition of ministerial posts and women's participation as leaders in some political parties. Although it is ironic that conflicts as cruel as these should help the suffragette cause, the fact is that war allowed women to become professionally trained and

1. See Summers (1998: 1–9) and Healy (2002: 1) to establish the relationships between World War I and the social emancipation of women.
2. Nash (1995: 4–5), Strobl (1989: 17) and Linhard (2005: 2) are the essential works about women's experience as militiawomen during the Spanish Civil War.

to form part of the social forces within the public sphere. This has, however, already been sufficiently studied.¹

E. Nolte (1997: 311) coined the phrase 'European civil war' to refer to the conflicts that occurred in Europe between 1917 and 1945. Studies of the Spanish Civil War have produced a large number of books that follow this interpretation and represented the conflict as though it were a summary confrontation between Bolsheviks and Nationalists. This article, however, aims to focus on a more specific and modest, yet paradigmatic, analysis: the mobilizing of certain contingents of women within the context of the Spanish Civil War, with the purpose of discovering the extent of their political participation.

We have chosen to examine different groups of nurses for our alternative narrative of the conflict, nurses who were not only active on the two fronts of the war but also at the heart of the two societies that found themselves cut off from each other by the military *coup d'état* of 18 July 1936. This is not the generally accepted starting point for examining women's experience in the Spanish Civil War, as can be seen by the studies of M. Nash, I. Strobl and T.A. Linhard, who focused their attention on the romantic image of the militia.²

In the first months of the Spanish Civil War, a number of women enlisted spontaneously in the Frente Popular (Popular Front) to fight alongside their comrades, but the militia really ceased to exist after 1937. The fighting woman was represented in this way by Mika Etchebéhère or Rosario Sánchez Mora, nicknamed *la dinamitera* after Miguel Hernández's popular poem explaining how she lost her hand manipulating munitions, and became an unused icon in Republican propaganda as she gave way to the image of the conventional woman (Bunk 2003: 102; Etchebéhère 1976: 7).

The Francoist rebels also included the female militia in their propaganda, thus providing the perfect example of a reversal of the natural order. After the first few months of fighting, militiawomen on both fronts were shown as being monstrous characters who had not only succeeded in putting the soldiers in danger by exposing them to venereal diseases, but had also dared to take up arms, which were historically and culturally the property of men.

Most Spanish women were obliged to work in the rearguard, following the slogan 'men to the front, women to work' (Anon 1936). Even the most politically radical women's organizations, such as the anarchist *Mujeres Libres*, used these kinds of slogans in their magazines. This image of the Spanish woman as the *Mater Dolorosa* waiting in the rearguard and sacrificing her children for the Republic was also put forward by the Communist leader Dolores Ibarruri, universally known as *La Pasionaria*, who was the living symbol of the female anti-Fascist resistance (Byron 2004: 141). On the Nationalist side, the image of the woman resigned to sending her sons away to die for the fatherland was present with even more force whilst she stayed at home and put all her efforts into her domestic chores.

Our interest in studying the activities of voluntary nurses during the Civil War comes from various different areas. Firstly, nursing was practised on both sides during the conflict, and this fact provides us with representative information on how women took part in the Civil War as active historical agents. In this way, nursing refutes the thesis that women do not

take part in wars – that their natural place is in the rearguard, where they suffer the consequences of the conflict indirectly, because they are by nature pacifists.³ Nurses, on the other hand, are shown in the photographs of the time as uniformed and organized contingents with their own specific hierarchy, regardless of the side they were on (Figure 1).

Secondly, the professional nurses formed a group of people who did not have to find a role within their sphere of influence by struggling against men, but rather against another group of women, who belonged to the different religious orders. Nuns, mostly Catholic, had traditionally had a monopoly on hospital work and, therefore, their caring for the sick was historically tied to practising charity and comforting those in pain. Defined in this way, nursing was not considered to be a profession whose purpose was curing the sick. Caring for the sick was still closely tied to the charity work of the religious orders.

Thirdly and finally, a study of Spanish nursing during the Civil War shows the significant social transformations that affected this area of work within this context. The professionalization of nursing cannot be seen as merely a result of the war, since this recognition was part of a long process that began with the reforms passed during the Second Republic. The Civil War accelerated the scope and social repercussions of these reforms.

The purpose of this article is to examine this expansion of nursing and to analyse its implications with regard to the visibility it offered for the participation of women who dedicated their efforts to nursing on both fronts of the Civil War. Both the women who served with the Republican Government and those who joined the Nationalists received formal education and were considered to be carrying out an activity which would have a great social impact not only at the front but in the rearguard as well. Furthermore, they did not limit themselves to curing the sick and the injured; they also formed part of a broader health programme which was

3. See Darrow (1996: 81) to explore the myth that defines war as a male experience during the Great War.



Figure 1: Procession during a demonstration supporting People's Army, Barcelona, 28 February 1937 (courtesy of the Centre International de la Croix Rouge).

begun during the war and which focused on the public health problems that affected the entire social fabric of the country. In the context of the Civil War, the nursing staff's activities were associated with virtues which were poles apart, from the Christian charity and self-sacrifice of the women in the Red Cross to the revolutionary and emancipating elements of the new trade unions. The nursing *vocation*, a concept which had been used historically as an analogy for the religious vocation, was subject to the various social interpretations that existed during the conflict. Nursing had not only professional but also political implications, and it became a way for women to demonstrate their patriotism. Nurses on both sides marched in public and received decorations for merit alongside the soldiers.

For this work, we have referred to various archives belonging to the Centro Documental Cruz Roja Española, the Centre International de la Croix Rouge in Geneva, the Colegio Oficial de Enfermería de Madrid and la Fundación de Estudios Libertarios Anselmo Lorenzo.

The purpose of this article is, then, to define the most significant values that governed the concept of vocation in nursing during the Spanish Civil War. We will then relate these values to the ideological and political positions that existed during the conflict.

These political stances reflected the different attitudes to nursing, from the historical ties that existed with charity organizations to nursing as a profession which allowed Spanish women to achieve a certain financial and social independence. With this aim in mind, we have focused our analysis on two specific cases, the nurses of the Spanish Red Cross and the new professional nurses affiliated to the trade unions and other syndicates. Tensions arose among the latter group, even though they were supposedly fighting for the same Republican cause. In this way, we have attempted to provide an interpretation of the nursing community as a privileged space in which Spanish women fought their own specific political battle. This did not exclude the conflict between the different social factions which were fighting on the same front.

Before the Civil War

The Moyano Law of 1857 identified only two nursing categories, one which provided injections and medicines, and the midwife. However, there was no mention of nurses. Until the social reform movement, when the school of Santa Isabel de Hungría (1896) was created in Madrid, there was no school for training women as nurses. Dr Federico Rubio y Gali directed the founding of this school, and he thought of it as part of a larger project: the creation of the first surgical institute for therapeutic operations. With this aim in mind, the nurse was introduced in Spain, closely following the methods used by Florence Nightingale (1820–1910), the purpose being the reform of public health and nursing responsibilities in hospitals.

Despite the creation of new nursing schools such as the Santa Matrona in Barcelona in 1917 or La casa de salud del Marqués de Valdecilla in Santander in 1929, nursing continued to be a somewhat ambivalent profession because it was considered to be an occupation carried out essentially by members of religious orders. This can be seen in the Royal Order of 1915, which recognized the title of nurse for the Siervas de María. As García Caro has pointed out, the Hijas de la Caridad, another religious

order dedicated to health care, was, until a few years ago, 'the contingent with most health personnel in many hospitals throughout the country where they almost always carried out supervisory tasks' (García Martín Caro and Martínez Martín 2001: 147).

A fundamental event in the history of Spanish nursing was the creation of the Spanish Red Cross in 1916, under the auspices of Queen Victoria Eugenia, who had a close relationship with the English aristocracy and was aware of the need to create a body of women nurses following the catastrophe which was World War I. In this way, the inauguration of the first nursing school for the Spanish Red Cross was promoted: the Hospital de San José y Santa Adela, now known as the Escuela Universitaria de Enfermería de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, which still continues its activities in Cuatro Caminos, Madrid.

From a historical point of view, nursing made its most significant advances when carried out in wartime, because wars have always given a dramatic emphasis to nursing and have generally converted nurses into national heroines (Donahue 1985: 394). In this sense, in the history of Spanish nursing, one of the indirect consequences of World War I was the setting up of the women's nursing corps whose fundamental work was defined in the *Red Cross Regulations*:

The women's nursing corps of the Spanish Red Cross was created following the initiative of Her Majesty Queen Victoria Eugenia, and its purpose is to offer, as health aid to the Army and the Navy and the doctors of the institution, free assistance to the sick and injured in times of peace and war.

(Cruz Roja española 1928)

The women of the Spanish Red Cross have always been considered an essential element for the good functioning of a modern army, and they were involved in the war with Morocco and the Revolution of 1934 (Rojas Gutierrez 1943: 1). However, the *Report Presented in the XIV International Conference in Brussels* in 1930 mentioned that the number of candidates for the Spanish Red Cross was insufficient, owing to the literacy level of the female population. At that time there were 130 women in the Spanish Red Cross, when merely one year later there were 526 (Cruz Roja española 1930). This shows the significant increase in the number of women dedicated to health work in Spain during this period.

With the proclamation of the Second Republic, numerous reforms aimed at creating a secular state were initiated, and these reforms also affected the area of health. In 1931 the first ever State exam was drawn up for the Faculties of Medicine, which awarded the title of nurse, and the Spanish Red Cross, which had always had close connections with the Monarchy, became dependent on the Ministry of the Interior. However, the most important changes occurred following the outbreak of the war, with the appointment of Federica Montseny (1902–94) as minister of the Spanish Republic's recently created Ministry of Health and Social Assistance.

Federica Montseny's programme

Federica Montseny was a member of the CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo), the anarchist trade union, and a well-known anarchist leader.

She was one of the first ministers to hold this post, not only in Spain but in the whole of Europe. The Council of Ministers held on 25 November 1936 created a new ministry to replace the so-called Ministerio de la Beneficencia. Its purpose was 'to coordinate as soon as possible all the objectives and aims of official, private and public charity', and, as a result, 'all specific charity institutions were disbanded, whether or not they came under the protection of the government, and regardless of their nature and whether they were known as foundations, asylums, associations, boards of trustees or any other name' (Montseny 1986: 98).

Following this official order, the Spanish Red Cross was unionized by the Republican Government. This led some members, who were more sympathetic to the Francoist regime, such as Mercedes Milá Nolla, previously head of the Red Cross youth, to create a Red Cross on the Nationalist side, which had its headquarters in Burgos and Salamanca. On 24 March 1937, Francisco Franco named Milá president of the national Red Cross Women's Corps, which was legally recognized by the International Red Cross in Geneva (Marques 2000: 40). The women of the Red Cross were thus placed on opposite sides; this not only raised questions about their neutrality, but also symbolized the internal tragedy of the Spanish Civil War.

Federica Montseny realized the importance of being appointed president, and she chose another two women to fill posts in the ministry, thus increasing the presence of women in the process of political decision-making. Mercedes Maestre and Amparo Poch y Gascón, both doctors by profession, were responsible for the Subsecretariat of the Ministry and Social Assistance, respectively.

Poch y Gascón, besides being a doctor, was one of the founder members of the cultural association Mujeres Libres, together with Lucía Sánchez Saornil and Mercedes Comaposada. Mujeres Libres was considered to be an organization which had ideals similar to those of the CNT, but it was different inasmuch as it underlined the need for a specific movement aimed at promoting the emancipation of Spanish women. Although Mercedes Maestre was an active member of the socialist union UGT (Unión General de Trabajadores) and Federica Montseny reaffirmed her membership of the CNT, they joined forces to reform the Spanish health system, which followed a humanist concept of medicine.

Their approach to health problems was based on an understanding that sickness was the product of not only physical or biological factors, but also social factors. The way in which they looked after the sick was governed by values such as the *dignity* of the working classes, rather than the old idea of *charity*. Driven by her ideology, Montseny developed a project to cover all the health needs of the proletariat. She paid special attention to the problems arising from public health that could, during the conflict, easily lead to epidemics both on the front and in the rearguard (Montseny 1986: 97).

Furthermore, Montseny took specific measures typical of a secular state, such as legalizing abortion, creating the controversial *liberatorios de prostitución* (homes for rehabilitation where prostitutes would receive health care, psychotherapy and professional training) and even raising the salaries of social workers so as to recognize their job. In fact, one of the most important points in her programme was training for women, which allowed courses to be organized in the different trade unions for professional nurses.

When the Civil War broke out, the associations Asociación de Mujeres Antifascistas (AMA), controlled by the Communist Party; the Secretariado Femenino del POUM (Revolutionary Communist Party); and Mujeres Libres, an anarchist organization, began a cultural offensive against illiteracy amongst Spanish women through the creation of educational networks that trained them to work in favour of the common cause. There were few health care professionals in Spain (García Martín Caro and Martínez Martín 2001: 147). The religious orders held a monopoly in this area, and when the war began they joined the rebel forces, thus putting the Republican Government in a delicate situation.

The Ministerio de Sanidad y Asistencia Social organized rapid nursing courses in coordination with the different women's associations. This cultural programme for training women offered many illiterate working-class Spanish women the opportunity to become nurses. For the first time during the war, nursing became a remunerated profession and not a prolongation of naturally female tasks geared towards caring for the sick, as had been promoted by various organizations, including the Spanish Red Cross (Cruz Roja española 1928).

Training programmes designed by the Ministerio de Salud y Asistencia Social that aimed at creating a professional nursing corps can be traced in the different ministerial orders published in the *Gaceta de la República*. On 6 January 1937 a series of month-long courses was organized for nursing training in collaboration with the Comité Nacional de Mujeres Antifascistas, which grouped together all the Republican women's associations (*Gaceta de la República* 1937a).

Concern for the small number of nurses can be seen in these ministerial orders, which accelerated the training programmes in the faculty in Valencia in 1937 and which recognized the same validity for military nursing titles and those issued by the Ministerio de Instrucción pública (Ministry for Public Education), for the period in which the conflict lasted (*Gaceta de la República* 1937b). In April 1937 the government even authorized the Francoist front to organize courses under the direction of the Sección Femenina de la Falange Española Tradicionalista (Female Section of the traditionalist Spanish Falange), whose contingent of nurses was directed by Tina Esteban (*Gaceta de la República* 1937c). Contrary to what some studies on the history of Spanish nursing affirm, the war did not paralyse the training of professional nurses, but accelerated it. Some 130 courses were held during this dramatic period.⁴

In defence of the Republic, the AMA became the official organization for channelling volunteer women for work both at the front and in the rearguard. The AMA had orthodox Communist ideology and was led by Dolores Ibarruri. It controlled most of the training courses thanks to the support of government bodies as of May 1937. (This historic episode, known as the 'Days of May',⁵ was marked by a confrontation between Communists, Trotskyites and anarchists in the streets of Barcelona, and it concluded with the elimination of all factions that did not belong to the Communist Party.)

However, the AMA was not the only organization that developed this kind of educational network during the Spanish Civil War. The female secretariat of the POUM also promoted the training of nursing staff in the first

4. Hernández Martín (1996: 297) has argued that the training of nurses was stopped during the Spanish Civil War.
5. See Thomas (2001: 637) for a more detailed description of the 'Days of May'.

few months of the conflict by emphasizing the revolutionary sense of the fight against fascism. *Mujeres Libres* also provided nursing courses in order to replace the religious image with a new professional image based on workers' rights.

Other international organizations, such as *Socorro Rojo internacional* (SRI: International Red Aid), set up by the Communist forces, and *Solidaridad Internacional Antifascista* (SIA: International Antifascist Solidarity), based on anarchist principles, provided material support by channelling foreign aid for medical and health care purposes. Both AMA and *Mujeres Libres* collaborated with the SRI and the SIA, respectively, in numerous campaigns during the war, such as the 'Winter Campaign' or the 'Day of the Child and the Militiaman' (Anon 1939).

Despite the many associations offering intensive courses, there were no noticeable differences between the practices of the new professionals affiliated to the trade unions, the members of religious orders and the nursing staff of the Red Cross. However, the work of the nurses was not only classified as general and local health care, or the cleaning of instruments, but their fundamental mission was also to aid the sick in their physical, psychological and social needs, which meant that the ideology could be interpreted in a number of ways (*Gaceta del practicante* 1936).

The idea of assisting the patient through health care was defined by using the moral character of the nurse, the charisma of her personality, which was interpreted in accordance with the different ideologies that existed during the Spanish Civil War. Nursing activities were by no means guided by neutral values, not even amongst the women of the Red Cross, as can be seen in the analysis of the moral basis of their vocation.

The vocation of the nursing staff of the Spanish Red Cross

The history of science has reduced the vocation of nursing to a set of values and beliefs. Yet Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing, had used an analytical method based on statistics to investigate mortality rates and their causes. She also demanded certain moral values from those aspiring to become nurses. Nightingale did not think of nursing as a simple job, but as a more elevated task, a moral calling that required the nurse to know herself and to possess sufficient humility and love of her neighbour. As A. Bradshaw has written about Florence Nightingale, 'the moral purpose of nursing was inseparable from its practical outworking' (Bradshaw 2001: 23).

This tradition defined nursing through its moral purpose. In other words, a woman could not be a good nurse if she were merely intelligent; she also had to be a good citizen. Training to be a nurse implied a conversion governed by values such as obedience. With this aim in mind, Florence Nightingale's nursing school at St Thomas's Hospital had been structured around the figure of the superior and its setup was not dissimilar to that of religious communities.

More specifically, the Spanish Red Cross reinterpreted Florence Nightingale's heritage using values such as charity, which was associated in its regulations with the Catholic tradition. This association was deeply rooted owing to the significant political influence of the church. Dr Alberto Suquet, in his *Compendio para damas enfermeras/Compendium for Nurses*, gave a justification for work associated with health care by invoking

Christian piety: 'Jesus was the first person to take pity on the sick and He was their saviour. His words encouraged Mankind to help the sick and unfortunate' (Suquet n.d.).

The Catholic nature of the nurses of the Red Cross was emphasized from the beginning of their training, since the aspiring nurse had to show submission to the authority of the superior, who defined the model of ideal behaviour for leading a life with discipline and obedience. In wartime, the military structure reinforced the religious nature of nursing through the prohibition of any kind of relationship outside of what was strictly necessary for health care under pain of dismissal.

The *Reglamento del Cuerpo de damas enfermeras de la Cruz Roja española/Regulations of the Nursing Corps of the Spanish Red Cross* of 1928 laid down the virtues of nurses. Care included 'comfort' and 'religious assistance', which should, furthermore, be imparted with 'sweetness and patience', two characteristics that were naturally associated with the female sex. In this sense, women had qualities that 'gave them the privilege of being able to lighten pain and to place their heart and their head easily in agreement when dedicating themselves to the caring of the sick' (Cruz Roja española 1928).

The values governing the vocation of the nurses of the Spanish Red Cross had strong ties with the Catholic religion: 'devout self-sacrifice, a spirit of severe discipline, Christian love for our fellow man, kindness and exemplary, endless patience with the sick' (Cruz Roja española 1928). This spiritual image of the nurse represented as an angel, with an emphasis on her feminine purity, can be seen in photographs of the time (Figure 2).

During the Spanish Civil War, various regulations were produced in Madrid, Burgos and San Sebastián, and these served both sides in the conflict



Figure 2: E. Gärtner, Prison camp in San Pedro de Cardeña, Burgos (courtesy of the Centre International de la Croix Rouge).

6. In this paper, Ofer (2005: 664) explores femininity as a controversial term for the 'Sección Femenina'.
7. See Ackelsberg (1991: 147) for an analysis of the participation of *Mujeres Libres*.

as a code of operation for the different nursing corps. Although the educational programme of these regulations did not vary too much, the ideological attitude of the nurses themselves was extremely important when they had to decide to join either the Red Cross that was controlled by the Republican government or the Red Cross that was under the control of the Nationalists.

The women in the Red Cross on the Nationalist side were politically governed by the *Sección Femenina*, which defined nursing as a female occupation geared towards 'relieving the pain and anxieties of war'.⁶ The Nationalist woman was seen as being the faithful guardian of family traditions, and her fight as a nurse during the Civil War was seen in terms of 'a martyr for the fatherland', according to Concha Espina's homage to the nurses of the National Red Cross who were assassinated by the Republican army in Somiedo (Asturias) (Espina 1941).

On the front where General Francisco Franco was fighting, women were active agents despite the traditional attitudes that apparently restricted their activities to the domestic sphere. Spanish Francoist women were mobilized during the war, and some even became political leaders, such as Pilar Primo de Rivera. From the year 1932, certain groups of ultra-Catholic women formed organizations in exile, including *Acción Católica* and *Aspiraciones*. The purpose of these organizations was to fight against the secularization of the State and schooling that was being promoted by the reforms of the Republican government. Two years later, in 1934, the *Sección Femenina* was created, headed by Pilar Primo de Rivera. This provided the structure for the movement that would be responsible during the war for organizing and training the nurses for the Spanish Red Cross, the *Margaritas* (a Carlist organization) and other similar voluntary women's associations.

Whereas the Francoist ideology meant that the values of the women of the Red Cross adopted a more conservative idea of the Catholic woman as holy, modest and self-sacrificing, in the Republic the women of the Red Cross had social ties with the bourgeoisie and were seen as politically moderate agents by the new nurses who were affiliated to the trade unions. In fact, the women of the Red Cross were often accused by their comrades of enjoying certain privileges. This confrontation showed that they defended different concepts of what health care entailed, one geared towards Christian charity and the other governed by a professional vocation which, amongst the most committed nurses, took on revolutionary dimensions.

Nursing vocation for *Mujeres Libres*

Mujeres Libres represented the most radical faction of the female groups of the Spanish Civil War. According to Suceso Portales, the purpose of the organization was to free women from the triple slavery to which they were being subjected: their ignorance, their slavery as producers and, finally, the social slavery to which they were subjected merely because they were women. The principles of *Mujeres Libres* were established at the beginning of 1936 by certain regional groups of anarchist women in Madrid and Barcelona which united to fight the discrimination suffered by their anarchist companions. It began to publish a magazine in May that year, but not until 1937 was it given the official structure of a national federation, bringing together more than 20,000 members during the war.⁷ Its fundamental

strategy was centred on the definition of an educational programme to alleviate the lack of professional training, as this was one of the fundamental reasons for the labour segregation of women in Spain.

In the magazine *Mujeres Libres* an innovatory image of the Spanish woman was given, a woman who wanted to break with a tradition that was based on the Catholic religion and bourgeois thinking. The members of the organization were aware of not only the fact that they were taking part in the war effort, but that they were also accelerating the social revolution, as stated in the first issue of the magazine:

In a few months the women in our struggle have rid themselves of the prejudices of centuries and they have become part of the Revolution and the war effort, based on constancy and a renovatory spirit, which is bound to lead us to victory.

(Anon 1937)

Nursing courses were given in *El casal de la Dona Trballadora* (House of the Working Woman) in the Paseo de Gracia, Barcelona, and these were geared towards training professional nurses who could replace the figure of the nun in health care (Ackelsberg 1985: 72).

Poch y Gascón even included nursing training in the magazine, providing elementary training in health techniques, but without forgetting the important role of women in the Revolution. These courses were also offered as night classes so that working women could go to them after their day's work.

At 7 I go to a nursing course in the *Casal de la Dona Trballadora*. I don't have a lot of free time, but I so want to be able to care for the sick at the front! I so want to fulfil my vocation as a nurse with a firm hand and my face free from mascara and blusher.

(Anon 1938)

The new professional nurse of *Mujeres Libres* arose, on the one hand, from a confrontation with the religious vocation and, on the other hand, from the social rejection of the feminine characteristics attributed to nurses (Figure 3). The nurse of *Mujeres Libres* was nothing like the moral model of the women of the Red Cross, based on charity and represented by the bourgeois aesthetic of the woman in make-up. For *Mujeres Libres*, the women of the Red Cross were not committed to their work, because they were more concerned with what they looked like than with the hygiene in the hospital. 'We have often criticized the superfluous adornments worn by the nurses as we consider them to be incompatible with the nursing vocation' (Anon 1936).

Mujeres Libres understood that these questions endeavoured to hide the real problem that was being discussed during the war, the model for nurses and, therefore, the model for women who had managed to break into the labour market and who were reaffirming a social identity that was independent from that of a man.

The vocation of the nurses of *Mujeres Libres* was defined as a calling, but this was justified by a personal ethos governed by values such as determination or the role of hygiene in patient care. The emergence of this



Figure 3: E. Vidal, Nurses who have replaced Nuns in the Hospital carefully looking after injured militiamen (courtesy of Anselmo Lorenzo Foundation).

new kind of nurse necessarily led to the uncovering of the injustices of the bourgeois social order.

Vocation is the calling, the road to follow. A calling that goes beyond personality. Vocation and personality are part of the same thing, they are the cause and the effect [. . .] To reach this vocation is to overcome oneself: it means a change in the personality we have inherited to exchange it for another which we must create [. . .] Volunteers with vocation comrades, nurses [. . .] The woman who looks after the sick [. . .] should not be concerned with wearing mascara or having a rainbow on her cheeks. It is not a question of contrasts in the colours of the face. It is something much more human: the sick need all sorts of care and most of all sensitivity.

(Anon 1936)

The nurses of *Mujeres Libres* had to be fully aware of the delicate nature of their mission and to face up to it with a firm and clean personality. To conclude, the moral principles of these nurses who were committed to the revolution during the Spanish Civil War led them to focus their efforts on a feeling of humanity in the face of the pain of suffering.

Nursing vocation for women during the Spanish Civil War

This article has called into question the interpretation of nursing as a simplified confrontation between two perfectly defined and homogeneous sides. To do this, we chose to focus on a hermeneutical tool which could be considered as being a case of little importance, but this is only apparently true: the training of nursing contingents during the war.

Looking back to the thesis formulated by Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas*, a work which was written during the Spanish Civil War and which

discussed how modern societies might prevent war, we have endeavoured to show that Spanish women did not embrace pacifism.⁸ But as opposed to Woolf's premonitions, women during the Spanish Civil War did not refuse 'to make munitions or nurse the wounded', and members of the militia such as Amalia Bonilla did not represent their common experience.⁹

As Coleman has pointed out, 'After March of 1937, women were forbidden from participating at the front and from wearing uniforms, unless they were nurse's uniforms' (Coleman 1999: 50). Therefore, we have analysed the idea of vocation in Spanish nursing as an element which helped to organize the different groups of women in health care during the war. These groups were not constituted around two homogeneous factions, but instead they were established in a more complex way. Different models of nursing coexisted on the Republican side oriented by political values, such as those of Anarchists, of Trotskyists, of Communists and of Liberals and even, on the Francoist side, included simultaneously royalist and Falangist women and others who supported traditionalist ideologies.

A first analysis could establish that the nursing vocation implied a moral dimension, inheriting the Christian tradition on both the Republican and the Nationalist side. Self-sacrifice and care in the face of suffering were defined as the virtues of a nurse, and in the same way, values such as efficiency were introduced as an element inherited from the nursing movements of the nineteenth century. But if the vocation is analysed not only as an *ethos*, as moral behaviour, but also as a *pathos*, in other words, as a passion that encompassed the different political options arising from the conflict, this study is able to reveal the underlying variety of the different groups of women that existed during the Spanish Civil War.

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8. See Woolf (2006: 210). She quotes Delaprée (1937: 34–35) to show, through the representation of Sergeant Amalia Bonilla, that if sanctioned, the fighting instinct easily develops.
9. 'Next they will refuse in the event of war to make munitions or nurse the wounded. Since in the last war both these activities were mainly discharged by the daughters of working men, the pressure upon them here too would be slight, though probably disagreeable' (Woolf 2006: 127).

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