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Solidarity and silence: motherhood in the Spanish Civil War

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Abstract

The subject of this article, the role of mothers in several Nationalist Castilian *pueblos* during the Spanish Civil War, provides insight into the impact of war on families. Regrettably, there has been little historical attention paid to gender in the *pueblos* during the Spanish Civil War. Due to the paucity of written records of the experience of motherhood during the war, this project makes use of oral sources. The *pueblos* under consideration here lie outside of the city of Salamanca, in the region of Castilla and León. The men and women of these *pueblos* recall vivid images of their mothers during the war, memories of overwhelming fear and onerous labor; in so doing, they reveal the inherent value of their daily life during the war. The perception of mothers, as portrayed in the prescriptive literature of the 1930s in Spain, conflicts with the experience of motherhood during the Spanish Civil War. An examination of the impact of this war on mothers in this region of Spain reveals that they, whether through silence or solidarity, developed a culture of coping, a vigorous motherhood shaped by the specific social and historical circumstances in which these women found themselves. A close look at Castilian *pueblos* during the Spanish Civil War suggests that the war altered more than the economic and political life; instead, as historians of other areas of Spain have argued, it shook the very foundations of the Spanish family.

Keywords: Castilla, pueblo, motherhood, oral history, Civil War, nationalism.

Introduction

The *pueblos* of Castilla, in the heart of Spain, are ripe with stories of motherhood and war. “At that time, my mother gave birth every three days,” 88-year-old Alfonso Bermejo joked. Asked about his mother’s experience during the Spanish Civil War, he replied, “she had nine children, so that was her world.” Life during the war, according to Bermejo, was not as difficult for his mother because of Manuela, an impoverished neighbor who had 17 children and, hence, was always ready to wet nurse another child for pay. Bermejo’s family would pay Manuela for her breast-feeding services. “All my siblings were at her breast,” Bermejo said. “She was like a member of the family” (Alfonso Bermejo n.p.). Rosa Andrés remembers the war differently. Scarring her forever is a memory of a pregnant leftist woman walking by the stone bridge in the town of Cantalapiedra. With families gazing in fear from behind curtains inside their homes, on either side of the bridge, two fascists attacked her. One grabbed the woman and the other beat her to death with a shovel. “And one of them was the undertaker,” Andrés recalls. The experiences of Bermejo and Andrés indicate the deep divisions and the depth of suffering among those living in the *pueblos* of Spain from 1936 to 1939.

The role of mothers in the Spanish Civil War provides crucial insight into the impact of war on families. The image and perception of mothers, as portrayed in the prescriptive literature of the 1930s in Spain, conflict with the experience of motherhood during the

Spanish Civil War. The historical subjects under consideration here lived through the war in *pueblos* located outside of the city of Salamanca, in the region of Castilla and León. This geographic area was chosen for several reasons. Although historians have examined the role of women in the cities during the Civil War, regrettably, there have been no historical studies of mothers in rural settings during the war. The villages under consideration were overwhelmingly Nationalist and devoutly Catholic. According to historian Raymond Carr, the Spanish Civil War is only comprehensible as a war of “geographic loyalty,” a country split into dangerous sections where one had to grasp the political bent of the area or risk life and limb. Mothering in this climate was an ordeal (135). The men and women of the *pueblos* of Castilla recall vivid images of their mothers during the war, memories of overwhelming fear and onerous labor; thus, they reveal their importance in the daily life during the war. Due to the paucity of primary sources on the experience of motherhood in the war, in the Spring and Summer of 2012, I organized, under the auspices of the Chief Librarian of the Public Library of Cantalapiedra, and with the support of the mayor of that same town, interviews with 24 men and women who remembered the Civil War and whose memories of motherhood were particularly compelling.¹ An examination of the impact of this war on the mothers in this region reveals they developed, whether through silence or solidarity, a culture of coping, a vigorous motherhood shaped by the specific social and historical circumstances in which these women found themselves.

Background

Though numerous historical studies analyze the Spanish Civil War and to a lesser extent, gender in Franco’s Spain, there has been little focus on motherhood during that time and nothing has been written on motherhood in the *pueblos* of Spain during the war. Considering that the overwhelming majority of Spain’s population in the 1930s lived in such rural villages, this is a glaring absence in the historiography. Approaching the role of motherhood presents serious historical obstacles. In both written and oral primary sources, mothering is portrayed as a natural and ahistorical construct. In the words of one woman, “Of course my mother did not participate in politics. It was enough work caring for the children” (Andrés). In oral histories, pamphlets, church documents, diaries, personal correspondence, magazine and newspaper articles, and memoirs of this war, all examined in the pages that follow, the most oft-repeated idea is that mothers were doing nothing out of the ordinary during the war. Spaniards, simply put, did not consider motherhood a historical concept and have little historical memory for the changing role of mothers. On numerous occasions, when asked what their mothers did during the war, respondents scoffed at the notion that mothers were even worthy of historical consideration; waving her hand as if to dismiss the question, one woman insisted, “all my mother did was make bread.” Motherhood as a historical subject has been neglected in Spain precisely because it is seen as a function of nature: the very definition of essentialism. Another obstacle in the search for the Spanish Civil War mother is that, although there are some significant similarities in the ways Spaniards conceived of motherhood during the war, there were clearly competing definitions of the good mother. Franco’s ideal, often called the *perfecta casada*, contrasted with the more egalitarian model of mothering put forth by Republicans. In her treatment of anarchist women in the Spanish Civil War, Martha Ackelsberg writes that “a reorganization of sexual and family life and a reconstitution of women’s roles were essential components of the revolutionary

vision” (26). Photographs often reproduced this new public role; in one, Republican women are in uniform and holding rifles, talking with male soldiers. The caption reads “male and female soldiers feel united by an impulse that is not merely ideological,” suggesting that sexual tension might also be at play in drawing these troops together (Abella Bermejo n.p.). But it was equality in the battle, the “*lucha común*,” that Republicans privileged. In one photo, female industrial workers and soldiers stand united. The caption reads, “Women enter into active political participation, in teaching, in the hospitals, in the factories, in equality with men” (Abella Bermejo n.p.). Thus, the definition of womanhood was contested by Fascists and Republicans.

The problem of conceiving of motherhood historically is not simply a Spanish dilemma. Stephanie Coontz captures this tension between various definitions of motherhood in her study of American mothers. It is, according to Coontz, virtually impossible to locate a stable notion of mothering (115–117). As a construct, gender itself is difficult to situate historically. Since notions of motherhood are intimately tied to conceptions of the good woman, motherhood is doubly difficult to pin down as a feature of identity. The work of Stuart Hall and Judith Butler forms a strong foundation in this endeavor; both discuss the way that gender identity is historically situated as a cultural construction. Butler writes about the way that gender must be reproduced and proven daily through “performative acts” to “demonstrate” one’s gender.

This was certainly the case for mothers during the Spanish Civil War. The mothers of the *pueblos* of Spain led inherently valuable lives. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich writes, “When you decide to write about the life of an ordinary person, you start out with the premise that this person is not important because of something they did or who they were, but because understanding ordinary life has a value of its own.”

Despite the difficulties involved in trying to define gender and motherhood during the Spanish Civil War, several historians have made important contributions to this field. Mary Nash has written extensively on the role of women in Franco’s Spain. “Motherhood,” according to Nash, “evoked not only courage and bravery but also sacrifice” (55). Motherhood was essential to the Franco regime, and in fact, “women’s primary social function was motherhood. Hence, women’s aspirations related to work, education and self-betterment, social activity, and emancipation were perceived as a threat to their biological destiny as breeders of the nation’s future generations” (Nash 183). Under Franco, women were forced into the traditional roles of wife and mother. The Catholic Church became a powerful force in maintaining women’s submission through National-Catholicism (Shubert 234). The Fascists used a special group within the government known as the Woman’s Section to “instill domestic values in Spanish women who were (all) bound to be mothers and wives” (Morcillo 33). Aurora Morcillo discusses this long history and writes that:

The National Schools of the Women’s Section (WS) imparted basic instruction on the principles of the *Falange*, preparing women for their domestic duties. The WS orchestrated its program of indoctrination from several departments, each with its own function...[and] imparted Catholic and patriotic femininity in Spanish women (103).

Alicia Alted Vigil writes, “Woman’s entire being was conditioned by motherhood, and her destiny was to live for home, husband and family” (198).

These important observations show that the Spanish Civil War significantly transformed the notion of family. One of the only ways that women could speak freely

was as mothers, because motherhood seemed to transcend politics and war. The essentializing that maintained motherhood in ahistorical spaces also allowed women some freedom of expression. Their mothering contained also a hidden code, a language that signified power. By examining the experience of *pueblo* mothers, this study will illuminate the power of mothers over the daily functioning of the *pueblos*, as well as the complex interaction between their public representation and their intimate reality during this war.

Representations of the good nationalist mother

The Spanish mother was a reference for discussions of domestic life throughout Spain. The ideal of femininity held that women were the “*ángel del hogar*.” Numerous publications of all political sides referred to the loving arms and the warmth and tenderness of mothers. Hilario Yaben wrote in 1931 that all children needed both the “sweetness and delicateness of the mother, and the love and vigilance of the father to form the heart” (n.p.). Before, during, and after the civil war, Spaniards wrote often of the image of the good mother. She occupied a central symbolic place in the gender culture of Spain; thus, fascist and republican motherhood, in their most general form, sprung from the same essentialized image of the mother as the reservoir of good in the nation. However, since the *pueblos* under consideration in this article are predominantly Nationalist, I will concentrate in understanding the overall sense of femininity and motherhood in the Nationalist Spain of the period. The discussion here will not delve as fully into concepts of femininity for Republicans.

Nationalists dismissed the Republican notion of equality when discussing the ideal role of mothers. The fascist mother was a fundamental symbol of the counterrevolution. “The good state,” according to one editorial from 1938, “rests in the family: and it will be strong if the woman, in the home, is healthy, fertile, laborious and happy.”² Some groups of women sought regressive policies that would require women to dress modestly – “Long sleeves, no cleavage showing, skirt to the ankle” – and to avoid “any dance that came out in this century.” They promised, “while the war lasted, not to wear makeup.” Nationalist women were supposed to adopt as their highest value, “not frivolity, but austerity” (Abella Bermejo 324). Conservative motherhood, the most severe form of this restrictive gender construction, was central to statism, a key to understand how Nationalists defined themselves. Historians have investigated Nationalist conceptions of motherhood and have focused on the conservative tradition that the fascist regime supported. According to Angela Cenarro, both the *Seccion Feminina* and the *Auxilio Social* attempted to win the hearts and minds of the women and children of Spain. These groups engaged incessantly in propagandistic attempts to glorify Franco as a benevolent *Caudillo* building a nation in which traditional motherhood was enshrined as part of a natural order (xiii–xvi). According to historian Michael Richards, moral reconstruction was crucial to the nationalist regime (xvi). State-controlled motherhood was at the heart of the Nationalist social program.

Images produced by Nationalists make clear this emphasis on conservative notions of motherhood (Bunk 9). In one poster, created during the war but reprinted in 1962, a mother holds her baby toward the sky. The caption reads, “For the mother and the child. For a better Spain” (“Union” 22–23). A pamphlet that fascists disseminated to families states, “Mother, Don’t Forget! That the culture of the mother is the best guarantee of the health of the child” (“Madre” n.p.). One Nationalist poster promised bread in the

“renovated Spain” (“Ni Una”). And in another publication, a bombed out daycare center appears in one image, next to a plan for a child center. “While the red bombs attempted to destroy, National Spain constructed.” On the surface, the fascists simply seem to support traditional motherhood; however, in the fascist paradigm, the mother would be removed from the parenting dynamic altogether and replaced by the good state.

The fascist state was predicated on the idea that motherhood was not enough for the healthy fascist child. The centers for feeding and care that were established after 1936 were only partly for physical sustenance. One Nationalist bulletin in 1937 urged practitioners to use the time that children were in the government centers to “correct their moral failings” and to “inculcate them with patriotic ideas,” converting the children into “true citizens of the new Spain” (“Boletín” 5). Historian Ángela Cenarro recognizes this side of the Nationalist program when she writes, “the Infant care centers were not simply to feed the children but were designed to promote ‘physical and moral education’” (132).

Mothers were encouraged to refuse the advice of “grandma, a friend, or a neighbor,” since that advice was “almost always ignorant” (“Madre” n.p.). Instead of relying on local knowledge regarding child rearing and habits of mothering, fascist motherhood was engineered, yet another form of fascist statism. Mothers were repeatedly encouraged to use “Nursing Dispensaries” as they would guard vigilantly the “nutrition, growth, and development of the child” (“Madre” n.p.). The ultimate expression of this highly organized motherhood was the “infant homes,” centers where women would bring their children to be cared for by a nurse during the first weeks of life. In these homes, each mother “suckles her own child. Any excess of milk is extracted by a vacuum apparatus, and the liquid this obtained is used in the feeding of children left alone...the mother with an excess of milk is given a fee of 60 pesetas monthly” (“Auxilio” n.p.). Mothers were often encouraged to leave their children in state-run nursery schools and “go off happy to her work” (“Union” 22–23). In this sense, the mother is both valued and managed by the nationalist state.

The experience of motherhood in the *Pueblos* of Castilla

What is missing from representations of motherhood during the Spanish Civil War is lived experience. The prescriptive literature reveals the gender ideals, the cultural norms and the political aspirations of each side’s abstract ideal, but it does not reveal the daily struggles for mothers during the war. Women in the *pueblo*, for instance, did not fit what Mary Nash says is the model for relationships during the 1930s: “women were to be self-effacing and submissive with total loving dedication to their children and husbands or parents, but they were also to be functional in their efficient management of the home” (11). A close examination of oral sources with subjects who were in the *pueblos* during the 1930s reveals a more complicated dynamic.

The paucity of scholarship on life in the *pueblos* is striking considering Spain’s rural nature. According to the official census of 1930, Spain’s population of 23,677,794 was overwhelmingly rural. In the Province of Salamanca, the area under consideration here, there resided a total of 339,101 people in 1930. Of that total, only 46,867 lived in urban areas. Hence, 292,234 inhabited *pueblos*. Those interviewed for this project came from Cantalapiedra (population during war, 2182), Cereceda de la Sierra (population during war, 466), Villaflores (population during war, 733) and Villanueva del Conde (population during war, 980), all villages in Castilla and all within 50 kilometers of the Nationalist

headquarters in Salamanca (population during war, 46,867) (“Censos”). These villages, and the region of Castilla itself, were predominantly Nationalist, Catholic and agricultural. With so much wheat and so many farm animals, few people in Castilla went hungry. In fact, the people in this region are proud of how much food they had and how much they were able to produce for the rest of Spain during the lean years of war. Castilla is typically golden with vast stretches of wheat in the summer and often blanketed with thin layers of ice and snow in the winter. Pueblos dot the landscape, each with a church surrounded by a town square, with houses radiating out away from the cultural and physical center and farms surrounding each small town. There is a deep sense of history among the villagers. In Cantalapedra, for instance, residents speak of the town wall, a medieval creation that protected the pueblo from invaders. Even today, those who live inside the wall are considered of a higher class than those who live outside the wall. The fact that the physical wall has not existed for several hundred years does not change the social distinction for those living on either side. The pueblos teem with life during the day; at various times, bars are full of men playing dominos or cards, women chatting and drinking vermouth, and children running wildly through the streets, streets with many more bicycles and tractors than cars.³

The dynamic public space of the Spanish *pueblo* was interrupted by the Civil War. There were few great battles in the *pueblos* of Castilla during the war: most of the fighting consisted of a more local violence. As Manuel Marcos Martín remembers, “It’s amazing how much hatred there was in the *pueblos*.... Everyone knew each other, and this bred resentment” (Martín n.p.). This animosity resulted in denunciations. The violence was almost always personal and individual in the war in the *pueblos*. Fighting was fierce in other parts of Spain, but a look at the *pueblo* reveals that much of the fighting in such regions was one person at a time, and, in some cases, involved the playing out of longstanding vendettas as much as ideology. The village was an intense ideological battleground, with battle lines drawn over the role gender or equity played in traditionalist Spanish cultural and familial life.

The *Pueblo*: child-rearing during the war

Even during wartime, much remained the same in the day-to-day life of the mothers of the *pueblos*. For example, they worked hard to maintain the domestic education of their children. One time-honored way of conveying wisdom to the young was through the medium of sayings and proverbs. These expressions pepper the language of those who remember their mothers during the war. Without being prompted, interviewees recalled their mothers saying the following:

De tal palo tal astilla.
 Cría cuervos y te sacaran los ojos
 Perro ladrador, poco mordedor
 De lo que se come se cría.
 En abril, lluvias mil.
 En agosto resfría el rostro.⁴

These sayings, repeated by Francoist and Republican women alike, transmitted easily reproducible lessons. Scholars have examined proverbs and found that they transmit norms through culturally situated metaphors (Lakoff n.p.). In the proverbs above we hear echoes of Castilian weather, religiosity and agriculture. An old Spanish saying, “After

you eat, do not read a single letter,” was repeated by mothers during the Civil War (Suarez-Valdez 47). Mothers admonished their children to avoid reading of any kind after eating. In fact, most mothers used the saying to encourage children to take the traditional Spanish siesta after the mid-day meal. This was a way to “get your strength back,” to be ready for the rest of the day. While they may appear quaint and antiquated to the outsider, such proverbs are a crucial part of the oral culture of everyday life in the villages of Spain. Thus, they were used by mothers to maintain the values from before the war and avoid any drastic change.

In addition to using phrases to maintain some semblance of normalcy, many mothers also sang to their children as a part of daily life. Gregoria Esculta remembers well how her mother would play the tambourine and sing old songs. Although she had to pass through countless “calamities,” hearing her mother sing and play helped the family cope. Rosa Andrés claims that her mother suffered through the war by singing songs of the church to the children. And Inocencio Hernández cannot imagine ever seeing his mother working and not singing. She would always “sing while cleaning.” According to Nieves Guerras Castro, singing was a sign of happiness, even during war. Singing even reinforced notions of sexuality. Several people remembered their mothers singing a song called “Bartolo,” a song that focused on a boy who had a flute with only one hole, referring to the male sexual organ. Other mothers sang, “*para las chicas guapas todo lo que sea. Para las chicas feas un cuerno*” (Martín n.p.). Such songs, for instance, reinforced sexist notions within the *pueblo* and encouraged an emphasis on outward beauty. The songs and sayings of the *pueblos* suggest that social education remained one of the key activities for women during the war.

The biggest worry for mothers of the *pueblo* was disciplining and caring for the children (Esculta n.p.). For Inocencio Hernández, skipping school meant a beating from his mother. “She felt bad after the beating and said, ‘look what I’ve done to you, handsome boy. Forgive me.’” María García remembers her mother giving food to the poor in town. When María questioned this practice, her mother slapped her twice across the face and made her pray to the Virgin and talk to the priest. This sort of discipline was deemed necessary both in times of war and peace and shows that not everything changed during war.

The *Pueblo*: motherly work during the war

Crucial to that disciplinary motherhood during war was the introduction of children to work. Mothers made certain that their children helped in gender-specific tasks. Young boys were often expected to go work in the fields with their fathers, while girls helped prepare the food, wash and iron the clothing, and take care of younger siblings. According to Nieves Guerras Castro, a good mother would be sure that her daughters knew how to pluck a chicken. “My mother,” according to Piedad Sánchez Izquierdo, “shared everything with her children and many times went without eating.” Dionisia Vicente was appalled to find out that food destined for the war front was being taken to the priests in town. When she confronted the man while he was taking large bags of food to the priests, she simply yelled, “if your father could see you, he would kill you.” Agustín Casillas recalls that his mother snuck onto a night train to make it to the town of Zamora to buy bread because the bread ration was miniscule. Mothers went to great extremes to provide for their families during the war.

The *tarea de casa* of mothers in the *pueblos* of Castilla was central to their daily existence even during war. Most sons and daughters, when asked about the political life of their mothers, respond that mothers had no time for politics for all the work. “What did my mother do during the war?” responded Berta Hernández López. “She made soap.” Mothers in the village used all parts of the animal, so they “took advantage of the fat” of the animals by making soap. As Hernández López said, “My mother worked like a slave.” In the 1930s, most Spanish households had no running water and only a few had electricity. Hence, the daily work of the mother was central if the household was to survive.

Clothing required a large amount of work. The women would often return from the well or the river carrying large jugs of water on their heads. Going to get water was the first chore of the day and often happened at sunrise. “Some women went to a river to wash the clothes,” while others washed with a basin. In winter, “you had to break the ice in the river to do the washing,” Herminia Conde Moreno remembers. “Washing clothes took three days,” according to Gonzalo Cacho Calvo. His mother would carry water from the well each day. Then, she would wash the clothes and then leave them to dry in the sun. Such work was so vital, one woman said, “that my mother wanted me to sew more than read.” For Manuel Marcos Martín, this was hard work but work “appropriate for a woman.”

Women in the *pueblos* also worked in the field. During the war this work was complicated by the presence of rationing. Since they were in agricultural areas, farmers had to produce a certain amount of their produce for the war effort. The wheat harvest of 1937, for instance, was deemed of “national utility” as farming became a means of national service (Fraser 393).

In fact, food preparation took most of the time each day. For many *pueblo* families, the food was cooked over open flames. Gonzalo Cacho Calvo wrote that his family’s oven was on the ground and burned hay and wood. “It was on all day long.” The mother was usually responsible for keeping the fire going. Amparo Cascón remembers her mother making the fire to cook and to keep the house warm in the winter. After butchering, a mostly male tradition that happened once a year, the mothers were responsible for cleaning the entrails of the pigs to use them to make sausages. Once the sausage was made, it would be stored in the *despensa*, left there to dry. For most of the year, the whole house smelled of smoke and of cured meat.

Memories of food dominate the oral histories of this period. Ample are the stories of breakfast, a large meal at mid-day, a *merienda* after the siesta, and finally the late meal, often eaten at 10 pm. There was some variety; many ate potatoes, fruits like grapes and cherries, eggs, chicken, goat, cow, pork, rabbit, and various types of bread with honey. Milk was sometimes available, usually from goats rather than cows. Alfonso Bermejo recalls that when he would go buy the meat, the butcher would sometimes give him a piece of the cow udder to cook in the day’s stew. “It was so delicious,” he recalls. The food most often mentioned was *garbanzos*. Many families ate *garbanzos* daily in a typical regional stew called *cocido*. As Rosa Andrés says, sighing, “everyday, *cocido*.” In lean times, the stew might only have beans, water and garlic. In times of more abundance, a good *cocido* would be cooked slowly with sausage, pig fat, cabbage, onions and small fried chickpea dumplings. One *pueblo* man, years later, insisted, “don’t ever give me *cocido* again. It will perforate my stomach!”

For other mothers, starvation was a reality of life during war. Those who owned land before the war were usually able to weather the economic strife of war; those who were

laborers on the land of others sometimes were not. Gregoria Esculta's mother had 15 children and 1 late-term miscarriage. Her mother worked on other people's land, alongside some of her children, day laborers usually working on large farms. They would often be paid in hay. Food was always scarce. She recalls many afternoon meals very well: "four olives and a small piece of bread. Nothing for the evening meal." There was usually no breakfast but sometimes her mother would toast oats and strain water through them; in her words, "that was our coffee." Sleeping was no better. "We slept four in each bed, and the mattress was filled with the hay that we would find in the summer." Other respondents mentioned such privation, and secondary sources have done a good job of detailing the hunger and poverty of many landless laborers during the war. However, in the *pueblos* of Castilla, fear was more prevalent than famine (Brenan 298).

The *Pueblo*: masculinity challenged

Though the prescriptive literature speaks little of the relationship between husband and wife other than the expectation that the husband was the head of the household, many oral histories reveal a strain in marital relationships during the war. Most oral sources do speak of the hierarchical relationship between husbands and wives. "My father was very authoritarian, and the war didn't change that a bit," related Manuel Marcos Martín. "He always kept the children in line." The control wielded by the father was clearly a feature of the Spanish family before the war.

However, sources suggest that the war changed the role of the father in the family. "When the war started," according to Estrella Roble Manzano, "my father changed. After that, my mother was in control. She was then the one who was in control." Many women used the word *valiente* to describe their mothers. While the literal translation of *valiente* is "brave," in this case it has more to do with being bold and unable to be intimidated. The result of so much fear within the *pueblo* was a silencing of the dominant father figure and this newfound fear by men resulted in Spanish mothers becoming more *valientes*. During the war, silence became a virtue among the men of the *pueblos*. Agustín Casillas recalled, "you had to be very careful about what you said, or you would be seen as an enemy." Or as Francisco López Galán said, the men especially had to be "prudent, and never talk about the war." Agustín Casillas used the same word in describing the tenor of the *pueblo*: "one had to be very prudent." The fear that may have produced a more silent style of *pueblo* man was the result of the constant threat of violence. As Inocencio Hernández stated, "many were killed in the *pueblo* by being taken out of their homes at night." Estrella Roble Manzano remembers her father being robbed and harassed by the Nationalists, all for going to try to collect the rent from one of his properties. Gregoria Esculta's brother-in-law was working in the fields when a group of men shot him and left him to bleed to death in the field of maturing wheat. Such violence, common during the war, emasculated men as an assertive social voice against the emergent national narrative.

In a popular and traditionalist culture that valued strength and vigorous expression, Spanish men momentarily suppressed those qualities. One popular saying that spread throughout Castilla during the war was, *Allá donde fueres, haz lo que vieres*. Masculinity, during this time of public silence and potential violence, was challenged. Perhaps the Nationalist emphasis on gender roles during the Franco regime was an attempt to revive in the man a role that had been frightened out of him during the war. As one document from immediately after the war states, the new regime must "return the man to his natural

form in the social organization, the role he holds spontaneously ... in the best interest of the family” (“Southworth” n.p.).

In the absence of the overbearing and controlling father, a more vigorous standard of mothering emerged. Many women spoke of their mothers as “*llevando los pantalones*.” For one woman, the war made her mother the “total matriarch.” Estrella Roble Manzano claims that during the war, her mother criticized her father for “being too soft with the workers.”⁵ Women, and especially mothers, seized the void as an opportunity to seize more control of family life; women used the newly silent men as momentary emancipation that, while short-lived and meager, was sufficient to shift the domestic balance of power. As one woman recalled, her mother had to appear strong, because the war required that her father appear to be “a good person” (Andrés n.p.). Although the Franco regime would later emphasize traditional gender roles, the relationship between husband and wife was transformed during the war. Neither the Republican emphasis on equality nor the Nationalist emphasis on tradition and the power of the modern state could override another factor; what most directly dictated the relationship between husbands and wives during the war was fear.

The *Pueblo*: solidarity as the highest mothering ideal

The suffering and sorrow wrought by the Spanish Civil War produced a positive side-effect: the solidarity of the *pueblo* mothers. There is in most *pueblos* of Spain a strong helping ethic, but the sense of female camaraderie was heightened during wartime. Whether Republican or Nationalist, the solidarity that began to develop transcended other features of life in the *pueblo*. This sisterhood, while not a feminist one, allowed women to capitalize on their shared despair to develop a women-based culture of mothering (Ryan 5). Many historians view the domestic sphere only as a restrictive and oppressive place. As Lisa Margaret Lines writes, “The domestic sphere was the only possible realm in which middle- and upper-class women were allowed to exist” (Lines 23). While the home may be limiting and oppressive, that domestic sphere was also used by women to subvert the dominant system, to help even so-called enemy mothers and to resist the politicized forces around them through their solidarity with other mothers. Historians such as Temma Kaplan have examined such notions of “gender consciousness” in Spain. As Kaplan writes, “female consciousness, though conservative, promotes a social vision embodying profoundly radical political implications that feminist theorists have scarcely recognized. To do the work society assigns them, women have pursued social rather than narrowly political goals” (566).⁶

This was certainly true in the *pueblos*, as political distinctions diminished between *pueblo* mothers at precisely the time one would expect them to become more rigid. “Not even between mothers of different political parties was there hatred,” remembered one man. “They got along well” (Alfonso Bermejo n.p.). Another woman said, “in my *pueblo*, there was no difference between Republican and Nationalist mothers” (Manzano n.p.). When caring for children, mothers worked together. For Rosa Andrés, the death of her mother in childbirth meant that she and her brother would be cared for by other mothers in town. Her grandmother helped to clean and go to the store, and when she and her sister-in-law were old enough, they helped as well. Another type of female help involved the distribution of food to the hungry. As one man recalled, “My sister would take charity to the poor, garbanzos or lentils” (Alfonso Bermejo n.p.). And according to Berta Hernández López, “if someone needed help, there was always help.” Gonzalo

Cacho Calvo remembers that two mothers in his town would occasionally walk through town with a basket, asking for donations. They would receive soap, rice or other commodities. And Gregoria Esculta recalled, “the neighbor would always give us salt if we didn’t have any.”

Within the constraints of civil war, these women shaped the public assistance in their town. In doing so, they put themselves in danger, eroding and sometimes breaking social boundaries. The regional nature of this solidarity is crucial. Theorist Suzana Milevska has argued that the “regional context is relevant exactly because of the danger of essentialisation and the overburdening complexities and exclusions that prevail in the national context.” (n.p) This seems to capture the type of sisterhood that developed in the *pueblos* of Castilla during the war. Mothers of all classes eschewed prescribed social categories in the interest of helping their fellow mothers, in the process often endangering their own lives. While not voicing any explicit promise of equality or other feminist goals, this solidarity allowed the women in question to shape their own lives, even if that freedom was limited and temporary.

Conclusion

If the theme of solidarity captures the lived experience of motherhood in the *pueblo* better than the image of mothering presented by Nationalists and Republicans, another feature suggests the limited nature of that solidarity: silence. The most often recorded sentiment expressed by those who recall their mothers during the war represents an intentional distancing that mothers undertook to avoid associating themselves with the war. Without prompting, every interviewee remarked on the palpable fear and the concomitant silence that this fear inspired.

The echoes of this trepidation have made access to these stories difficult for historians. Intentional sequestration of the memories of war would last until the end of the Franco regime and beyond. According to the Spanish Civil War Memory Project, ‘This absence in the historical record is the result of a “pact of silence” established by the Spanish policymakers...the legal expression of this “pact of silence” was the Amnesty Law of 1977. This law granted amnesty to political prisoners.... In addition, during the transition to democracy, Francoist officials destroyed thousands of written documents pertaining to the implementation of repression both during the war and the dictatorship’ (“Spanish”). The result is that many stories of mothers from the Spanish Civil War will be forever untold. As Michael Richards has written, “one of the symptoms of the control of memory has been a collective partial blindness” (10). Manuel Vázquez Montalbán comments on this same theme, writing that “very little of this hidden memory has been recovered in the new democratic Spain” (Richards 10).

The struggles of mothers in the *pueblos* of Castilla would not end in 1939. The end of the war was the beginning of a long dictatorship. Even in the relatively well-fed *pueblos* of Castilla, hunger would appear alongside political retribution. Spanish mothers, who had worked together to survive the difficulties of the war, would continue to set aside personal and political animosities and live together in the tumultuous post-war era. Lamentably, the post-war era would be designed by Francisco Franco. In him, Spain had raised a dangerous crow. And as the saying goes in the *pueblos* of Castilla, “*Cría cuervos y te sacarán los ojos.*”

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Notes

1. These interviews are cataloged in the Public Library of Cantalapedra as the *Memorias de la Guerra Civil: Colección de Historia Oral de los Pueblos de Castilla*, Biblioteca Pública Municipal de Cantalapedra, Cantalapedra, Castilla y León. When referring to these interviews, I will mention the name of the interview subject. The interviews are unpaginated.
2. This quote comes from a newspaper called *Azul*, published in Córdoba, January 9, 1938, n.p.
3. These images are gleaned from the author's 10-year annual journeys throughout this part of Spain.
4. Interviews are peppered with this sort of colloquialisms. See, for instance, García Guerras, Interview A-C24.
5. Many sources mention this. For instance, see Manzano, Interview A-C3.
6. In addition to Kaplan, see also Mercedes Yusta Rodrigo, *Guerilla y Resistencia campesina: La Resistencia armada contra el franquismo en Aragón, 1939–1952* (Zaragoza: Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2003) and Claudia Cabrero Blanco, *Mujeres contra el franquismo (Asturias, 1937–1952): Vida cotidiana, represión, y resistencia*. (Oviedo, Krk Ediciones, 2006).

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