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Mary Nash. *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War.* Denver: Arden Press, 1995. xvi + 261 pp. $22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-912869-16-2.

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Plus Ca Change, Plus C'est La Meme Chose

Mary Nash's book is a good, solid work, which the editors have selected to launch the Women and Modern Revolutions series. This series aims to examine such issues as the function of the sex-gender system during the revolutionary process, the role of women, the gendered aspects of revolutionary activity, and how gender interacts with other forces to determine the outcome of a revolutionary movement. Using the words of the anarchist activist Succeso Portales regarding the anticipated collapse of "male civilization" as a point of origin for her discussion, Mary Nash questions whether the Spanish Civil War did indeed bring about the collapse of the social bases of male supremacy or whether Portales' words reflect more of an optimistic hope.

Nash begins her investigation by outlining the prevailing Spanish gender ideology and the social and political status of women in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Spain. She points out that the Spanish discourse on womanhood, which viewed the home and the family as the most appropriate female sphere of activity, was deeply influenced by Catholic doctrine. Women's segregation from the public sphere was rationalized on religious grounds and maintained by high levels of female illiteracy and hostility to female waged labor. Nash characterizes the nascent feminist movement of the period as having more of a social orientation; it was more interested in civic and social rights for women than political equality. By emphasizing gender differences and maternalism, it unwittingly bolstered the prevailing gender discourse. By taking into account the history of the social conditioning of Spanish women, Nash emphasizes how much the changes in the sex-gender system, wrought by a revolution or a war, are bound up with the social milieu within which they take place.

In the following chapters Nash surveys the range of female activities during the Civil War: the various women's organizations and their activities, women's activities on the front lines (both as soldiers and as auxiliaries), and individual women's daily struggles to survive and maintain their families. Relying on women's personal papers, articles in women's journals, and debates on gender issues in the anti-fascist press, Nash outlines the constantly shifting contours of the Spanish gender discourse during the Civil War. Tracing the emergence of a public debate on the issues of prostitution and the spread of venereal diseases, and the legalization of abortion, she argues that both prostitution and abortion were viewed as primarily class, rather than gender, issues. Both the campaign to eliminate prostitution and the drive to legalize abortion were part of an attempt to construct a new sexual culture which would go hand in hand with different social and political norms and values. Only the anarchist women's organization, Mujeres Libres, posited a gender interpretation for these issues and argued that at their base lay an interclass male sexual oppression of women.

Of particular interest and importance is Nash's discussion of the portrayal of Spanish women in revolutionary imagery and rhetoric. She focuses on the figure of the *miliciana* (the militia woman), which became the symbol of female mobilization against fascism. This new image broke with tradition by presenting women as active, purposeful, revolutionary, aggressive and heroic. Even though the *milicianas* were a minority (even among working-class women) the image was inspiring and symbolized much of the early enthusiasm of the republican struggle. However, within a few months, the *miliciana* posters and propaganda had disappeared and were replaced by a new image–the "Homefront Heroine." The "Homefront Heroine" propaganda, which portrayed women as nurturers and healers, was a republican appropriation and reworking of the theme of women as protective mothers (or potential mothers).

This thematic shift in the propaganda was accompanied by a parallel campaign to discredit the milicianas and coerce them to leave the front line units. While in

the early months of the war the milicianas were praised as symbols of generosity and bravery, by the autumn of 1937 their activities were viewed as inappropriate and improper female behavior. A new allegation–that the milicianas were in fact prostitutes–succeeded in discrediting them and resulted in a popular cry for their recall from the front lines. This allegation, which received great prominence in both the republican and fascist press, was not challenged publicly by any of the Spanish women's organizations and "even radical defenders of female emancipation and equality took a sexist position on the issue of women's removal from the fronts" (p. 114).

While women's options expanded during the Civil War years and for the first time they were not openly denied access to the public sphere (especially in education, social welfare, and public health), these activities were legitimated by modifying traditional gender models, not by creating new ones. In her summation, Nash concludes that in Civil War Spain revolutionary change did not "imply the breakdown in patriarchal relations or a deep challenge to 'male civilization"' (p. 180). The temporary redefinition of gender roles witnessed between 1936 and 1939 was never a serious challenge and a revolutionary view of gender roles failed to emerge.

Nash's book will prove very useful in courses on the Spanish Civil War and women's history courses. It provides a general overview of women's activities during the war, which may then be supplemented by more detailed monographs, such as Ackelsberg's and Mangini's studies. One can only hope that Nash's book will be followed by other studies which will expand our knowledge of Spanish women's history in the twentieth century.

There are a few caveats to this assessment. First, the term "Spanish women is clearly taken to mean republican or anti-fascist women. While the focus on these women is understandable, a more modified term should be in place. The second issue is the absence of a comparative view or a theoretical approach. Take for example the campaign to discredit and eventually dismiss the *milicianas* from the front lines. Only after two chapters on the issue does Nash acquaint the reader with the fact that the campaign was taking place at the same time that the Communists were re-organizing the military. In place of the non-hierarchical, voluntary, popular militia staffed by a patchwork of anarchists, dissident Marxists, unionists, and remnants of the republican army, the Communists wanted to rebuild a regular, disciplined, hierarchical, conventional army. The price of this reorganization was the expulsion of the *milicianas*. This is a crucial piece of information for the analysis of the *milicianas* exclusion, which deserves more than the half page it received. Any comparative view would have shown that such an exclusion of women from the military (especially combat duties) was related to this kind of military re-organization and was paralleled in the formation of the modern European armies in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and has happened in the twentieth century in many countries after the successful end of revolutions and wars of national liberation. Ignoring these parallels might leave the impression that the Spanish Civil War functioned in a historical or cultural void. This is particularly troublesome in a book belonging to a series devoted to understanding the impact of gender on revolutionary movements and examining its comparative aspects.

References

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