

**Inbal Ofer.** *Señoritas in Blue: The Making of a Female Political Elite in Franco's Spain.* Sussex Studies in Spanish History Series. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010. x + 160 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84519-314-0.



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For decades after the fall of the Franco regime, the historiography of the Sección Femenina (Women's Section) (SF) of the Falange was mostly limited to two tendencies: characterizations of the SF as a vehicle to repress and confine women to anti-feminist Catholic domesticity; or defenses of the movement, written by regime apologists, as the repository of that which was pure, uncorrupted, and entirely Falangist within a dictatorship based on compromise between opportunistic, authoritarian factions within National Catholicism. Inbal Ofer, while not the first to make the case for a more complex and significant history of the SF, contributes in a serious way to our understanding of this indispensable organization within the Franco regime. Her work is a short history of the SF, with special focus on the leadership of this movement. Arguing that the SF was not merely a structure created to contain and channel women's energies, but an increasingly relevant participant in major changes that advanced women's educational, professional, and civic opportunities in Spain, Ofer positions the SF

as a successful advocate for Spanish women, especially middle-class women, during the dramatic economic and political developments in Spain from the 1950s to the early 1970s. Drawing on Spanish archives as well as oral history interviews with SF leaders, the author has made a major addition to our understanding of the history of Spanish women, within the broader contexts of the historiography of both the Franco regime and Western feminism.

From its founding in 1934 as an auxiliary to the exclusively male Falange, the SF had a surprisingly autonomous existence and leadership. Until the Spanish Civil War, parallel with the Falange itself, the SF was a tiny organization, with little national resonance. With the coming of the war, however, its membership multiplied geometrically, even more so because of the open door the organization offered for all women, even former republicans, unlike its male counterpart, which remained closed to those of the Left. The SF's only national leader, Pilar Primo de Rivera, sister of the murdered founder of the Falange, presided

over the organization until its official dissolution in 1977, during the transition to democracy. An early advocate for pure Falangism, Primo de Rivera, despite a timid and publicity-shy demeanor, was a strong voice within the regime against the dilution of her brother's ideology.

Primo de Rivera engaged the SF within the regime system, which saw tensions between the SF's leader and Franco over key decisions. Despite these struggles, the SF became decisive in promoting opportunities for women. While the SF was not a self-identified feminist movement, Ofer argues that it achieved its victories through what she describes as "relational feminism." This was an approach promoting not individual political rights for women, which in a dictatorship would make little sense, but practical opportunities for them in higher education; in the professions; and through enhanced legal status as wives, daughters, and even single women.

This last status--that of single women--was a characteristic shared by all major leaders within the SF. Ofer points out that only the unmarried, or widowed without children, were allowed to rise within the organizational hierarchy. Primo de Rivera never married, despite opportunities to do so, realizing that only by remaining single could she continue to lead the organization, carrying on the legacy of her brother, as well as focusing on her own ambitions.

In the 1950s, and especially in the 1960s, the SF became active at the national level in direct support of legislation to advance the status of women. With the rise of a new generation of women, who had taken advantage of the opportunities and examples provided by Primo de Rivera and others, the organization turned from glorifying the past to pushing toward a better future for its affiliates. Its most important achievement was the 1961 Law for Political and Professional Rights for Women, given final approval by the Cortes in 1962. This law opened almost all professions to women--other than in the military, judiciary, mer-

chant marine, and law enforcement requiring the use of weapons--along with higher education in all areas. It also provided legal redress to women in cases of familial objectives to their professional activities, which was a dramatic development, considering that just a few years previous married women were the legal equivalent of minors under their husbands.

In another area, its advocacy for health and physical fitness among young Spanish girls, the SF came into conflict with the Catholic Church. While the church insisted on serious modesty--demanding, for example, that young girls learning gymnastics or swimming wear skirts and even long sleeves--the SF pushed against these restraints. Over time, the SF achieved victories not only in terms of dress codes, but also in gaining the leading role in physical education and women's and girls' athletics, as well as through influencing fashion.

With the coming of the 1970s, and the years of transition after the death of Franco in 1975, the SF's successes within the regime came to undermine its prospects for long-term survival as an autonomous organization. Subsidized and granted its monopolistic status by the dictatorship, and having always made its advocacy within the confines of the regime, the SF was so closely identified as a bulwark of the state's conservative Catholicism that it had no chance of viability once Spain began to move beyond the fading echoes of Francoism. Given the appeal of the SF, which had always drawn most strongly from the middle and upper classes, it had less resonance to a Spain that had developed a more complex social and economic structure. In 1977, its offices were closed by decree, its activities ceased, and its dense national organization of volunteers and salaried staffers no longer worked on behalf of all Spanish women. Even so, as Ofer has demonstrated in this excellent and highly readable study, it left Spain transformed as much as the women who had led it. *Señoritas in Blue* should find a place in college

and university libraries, as well as the collections of those interested in the history of modern Spain, feminism in Europe, or European political history from the 1930s to the 1970s.

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