

Sandie Holguin. *Creating Spaniards: Culture and National Identity in Republican Spain.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002. xi + 264 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-299-17634-1.



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The Project of Cultural Unity in Republican Spain

Until recently, historical studies of the Second Republic in Spain have been mostly works of political history. In the past fifteen years, however, this has begun to change, as historians have started to take the role of culture seriously. Sandie Holguin has produced an excellent introduction to this topic in *Creating Spaniards*.^[1] In this well-written and concise work, the author presents a fascinating analysis of the cultural projects undertaken by the various political factions during the Second Republic in Spain (1931-39). Through the use of a wide variety of very good sources, the author emphasizes the Republican-Socialist programs such as the Misiones Pedagógicas, demonstrating the deliberate use of culture in an attempt to re-orient and re-define Spanish identity. She argues that while national organizations sought to impose an essentially Castilian cultural paradigm on all of Spain's population, there were a number of competing forces challenging the dominance of this version of Spanish nationalism. *Creating Spaniards* focuses on the Republican-Socialist coalition's cultural programs. This group sought to integrate Spain

into the European continent while secularizing the Spanish cultural past. The Republican regime sought to create a new citizenry based on a secular national vision that Holguin believes ultimately failed to unify Spain.

Holguin shows the varying nature of cultural programs, overturning outdated conceptions of policies carried out under the Republic. The introduction clearly outlines its theoretical footing, underscoring her interest in the hegemonic discourse of culture. The various political groups in Spain sought to use cultural means to impose their idea of Spanish culture on the nation. According to Holguin, the Republican-Socialist coalition was the most successful at devising a coherent strategy for using cultural programs to project its ideology to the masses. She uses the Misiones Pedagógicas as the backbone for much of her analysis, as it represented the Republic throughout the nation by bringing its cultural mission to small towns.

Holguin divides the cultural battleground of the Republic into three main categories: theater,

cinema, and literature, arguing for the importance of each in the Republican version of Spanish culture. The chapter on theater emphasizes the contribution of Federico Garcia Lorca's La Barraca theater troupe and El Teatro y Coro del Pueblo (part of the Misiones Pedagógicas) to the government program of cultural regeneration. Here Holguin demonstrates the essential unity within the Republican-Socialist coalition with regard to theater. The chapters on film and literature, however, show that the coalition was far from unified in its cultural program. The push by some to follow the Soviet example of film as propaganda was countered by a fear of those in the center that inflaming the passions of the people too much would lead to the downfall of the government. The lack of consensus among competing groups ended any possibility of a unified film culture. The same could be said for literature, as the creation of libraries throughout the nation led to debates over which books were most important for general reading.

As Holguin points out, efforts by the Socialists and Republicans to homogenize the Spanish past into a Castilian vision tended to alienate regional groupings that had their own cultural heritage. This is especially apparent in the discussion of literature (less so in that of film). However, the discussion deals only with Catalan nationalism, marginalizing the importance of Basque or Galician nationalism. The cultural revival that had begun during the nineteenth century was still very much alive among these groups during the Second Republic, resulting in the propagation of autonomy statutes for both Catalonia and Basque Country. A more attentive focus on these issues could have greatly strengthened Holguin's work.

The book's most obvious weakness is that while Holguin does discuss the right's ideology to some degree, there is only brief mention of the fact that the right faced a major shift in its ideology with the creation of the Second Republic. There was intense division over the nature of what it meant to be Spanish among the groups that

formed the right. The author instead prefers to use the right as a monolithic counterpoint to the left, rather than explore its dynamics in much detail. The only major exception to this general trend is the work of Ernesto Gimenez Caballero, a conservative critic. The right, here, plays the role of enemy to cultural innovation and the protector of "traditional" Spain, though in fact the right went through a period of dramatic introspection during the period of the Republic, as many of its key principles came under intense attack from the left. More discussion of the divisions among the parties of the right would not have undermined the author's analysis. It would have demonstrated the complexity of the discourse on both sides of the political debate.

These issues aside, *Creating Spaniards* is invaluable as an introduction to the cultural project of the Second Republic. Its problems are those of brevity and stem from its wide scope. This work clearly demonstrates the fact that Spanish national identity was a contested issue during the Republic, and that this struggle ultimately played a major part in the Republic's destruction. It is a highly readable work, with an engaging style of writing. The source base is very broad, as the author has had to navigate the labyrinth of Spanish archives left in the wake of the civil war. Holguin's ability to create a cohesive argument from such a wide variety of materials speaks volumes about the level of scholarship involved in the creation of this work. It clearly presents the important role that culture played in both the creation and the destruction of the Second Republic. All scholars interested in contemporary Spain and in cultural history should give it the attention it so clearly deserves.

Note

[1]. Published in Spain as *Republica de Ciudadanos: Cultura e identidad nacional en la España republicana*, trans. Tefilo de Lozoya (Barcelona: Critica, 2003).

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