



## History Matters: Teaching the Spanish Civil War Today

*Teaching Representations of the Spanish Civil War.* Ed. Noël Valis. New York: Publications of the Modern Language Association, 2007.

By Lisa Vollendorf

The Spanish Civil War looms large in numerous university courses offered by language and history departments. Whether those classes focus on the war years, the Franco period, or even 20th century Europe, instructors inevitably face difficult decisions about how to sift through the abundant materials available about the period. As Noël Valis points out in her excellent edited collection of essays, *Teaching Representations of the Spanish Civil War*, the difficulty of teaching the conflict relates as much to the contest for “truth” as it does to the seemingly infinite historical and artistic interpretations of the events of 1936-39.

Valis’ book is published by the Modern Language Association and therefore speaks most directly to language and literature professors. Yet readers of *The Volunteer* also will find much material of interest here and will likely come away from the volume with a long list of books, films, and ideas for further consideration. Although a specialized book for

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university teachers, it gives all readers the opportunity to engage with current thinking and to reflect on points of contact between Spanish fascism, violence, and democratic struggles and the same phenomena in other parts of the world since the 1930s.

Valis begins the book with a question that may strike readers as purely rhetorical: “Why does the Spanish Civil War continue to haunt us?” As the beautiful exhibit at the City Museum of New York in 2007 decisively demonstrated, International Brigade volunteers, as well as their family members, friends, and supporters, will have highly personal, extraordinarily moving answers to this question. Similarly, the 36 essays in Valis’ book probe ideological, artistic, individual, group, and international responses to this decades-long haunting. For example, Valis’ short introduction contextualizes some of the key questions for discussions of the Spanish Civil War, including whether we can agree upon definitions of a just or a good war. Like the other contributors to the volume (including well-known scholars Antonio Cazorla-Sánchez, Enric Ucelay-Da Cal, David Herzberger, Jo Labanyi, Shirley Mangini, Cary Nelson, Janet Pérez, Randolph Pope, Joan Ramon Resina, Adrian Shubert, Michael Ugarte, Mary Vincent, and numerous dynamic younger scholars), Valis emphasizes

the need to teach the Spanish conflict within its national and international contexts.

*Teaching Representations of the Spanish Civil War* will be of great service to professors interested in developing new classes or modifying current courses, particularly since the essays give overviews of key components of the war (e.g., the Abraham Lincoln Brigade; North African soldiers’ participation; and party alliances in Galicia, the Basque Country, and Catalonia) and its related cultural production (e.g., film, literature, and memoirs). For all readers, the book represents a beacon of hope as it implicitly highlights the power of the Spanish Civil War to galvanize today’s students into thought and action.

Teaching students that history does indeed matter is no easy task, as evidenced by the numerous references to both the challenges and rewards of teaching this particular civil war. Yet anyone who has seen entire classes cry in response to films about the war or heard them cry out in indignation after reading post-war novels knows that this tragic moment has the power to serve as a crucial introduction to political action for today’s often apolitical and disaffected younger generation. Moreover, immigrant students whose home countries have experienced their own civil wars in recent years and Generation X and Y Americans who otherwise never have considered the ravishing effects of war come together in these classes to consider the conceptual, political, and social impact of Spain’s violent years.

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## Preston

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passion over the past couple of decades. His tremendously engaging portraits in *Franco* (1993), *¡Comrades!* (1999), *Doves of War* (2002), *Juan Carlos* (2003) and, most recently, *Idealistas bajo las balas* (2007), showcase Preston's enduring fascination with the impact of history on individuals' lives and their impact on history.

Spanish historians such as Julián Casanova have pointed out that, for all its merits, British historical Hispanism has been weak on social history, methodologically conservative, and reluctant to engage with theory. To some extent, this is true for Preston's work as well, which tends to reserve its meta-historical comments for pref-

aces and epilogues. One curious stylistic feature of this book, for instance, is its authoritative tone, with its lack of direct references to primary and secondary sources (a lack partly made up by an extensive bibliographical essay). Preston's narrative voice, it seems, tells us how it is. This makes for wonderfully efficient storytelling, but is in tension with the notion, to which Preston himself subscribes, that any narrative of the war is necessarily contentious, if not precarious. To his great merit, however, Preston has produced brilliant disciples such as Helen Graham, Sebastian Balfour, Mike Richards, and Chris Ealham, who have gone on to become outstanding and innovative cultural and social historians in their own right. ❏

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As Valis' book convincingly demonstrates, the Spanish Civil War should not be taught as an anomaly, but as an episode whose multiple meanings and repercussions must be grasped in context. In this fundamental sense, the teacher's role is not dissimilar to the role of all who fight for democracy: we share a deep belief in the connection between commitment and knowledge, action and education, past and present. *Teaching Representations of the Spanish*

*Civil War* provides a much-needed road map for those interested in navigating the difficult task of making that connection clear to university students. The book will help instructors across the country develop courses that help students develop the knowledge and empathy they need to further the fight for a peaceful, democratic future the world over. ❏

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