

The Omnipresent Weapon

By Justin Murdock

From Andalusia to Catalonia, conflict ravaged the Spanish peninsula day-by-day in the third decade of the twentieth century. Warring political factions, specifically left-wing (Republicans) and right-wing (Nationalists), were backed by international entities, which only prolonged the Spanish Civil War into a nasty, brutish fight, turning erstwhile neighbors into fervent enemies. With the advent of civilian bombing and other grotesque measures used by both sides, innocent individuals were coerced to adopt political ideologies and follow the strict dogma the foreign political juggernauts promulgated; right-wing Nationalists became more extreme with the backing of German leader Adolf Hitler and Italian leader Benito Mussolini, while left-wing Republicans became more extreme with the backing of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.¹ The indoctrination of the Spanish people and foreign volunteers were only strengthened by the usage of political propaganda. Unlike the rifles and artillery that soldiers would wield to shoot at one another, as British volunteer Christopher Caudwell put it, propaganda was “on almost every building” with “posters against fascism, posters about the defense of Madrid, posters appealing for recruits to the militia, and even posters for the emancipation of women,” making it an omnipresent weapon throughout the war.² Unlike epistles and reports that were written throughout the duration of the war, graphic design and works of art, especially in propaganda, embodied a more accurate and fine-tuned representation of their time because of their constant and clear-cut nature, unlike written words which could be twisted and misinterpreted over time.

The Spanish Civil War was complex in nature, not only because of extensive external pressures and powers, but also due to the internal composition of political parties. The stem of these branched political parties can be rooted from the chaotic, pre-war Spain: a broken, desperate nation that just fought

¹ Murphy, D. “Spanish War in Slogans and Posters.” *D. Murphy: Spanish War in Slogans and Posters*, 1999, www.orwell.ru/a_life/Spanish_War/english/e_slog.

² Vergara, Alexander. “Introduction - Images of Revolution and War.” *The Visual Front - Posters of the Spanish Civil War*, University of California San Diego, 1998, library.ucsd.edu/speccoll/visfront/intro.html.

a humiliating war with the United States and was stripped of its colonial powers, had an unwieldy monarchical government, a significant enraged agrarian population living on huge plantations called latifundios, and political extremists from hopeful separatist states like Catalonia and the Basque Country.³ As various left-wing entities united to depose the ruling Alfonso XIII, they were finally successful in setting up a democratically elected leadership on June 28, 1931, but that only furthered Spain's role as a European political hotspot.⁴ With the advent of an adamant leftist government led by Prime Minister Manuel Azaña by that October, Azaña sought to bring massive reforms, from agricultural solutions to granting regional autonomy, and strongly condemned the Catholic Church. Ever since the Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther, many states that sought to become Protestant or secular criticized the Catholic Church on grounds of corruption or immorality. Propaganda and satire were made to ridicule the Church, and Azaña went as far to blame the church for the backwards society, claiming that "Spain had ceased to be Catholic." He ignored the widespread arson of religious buildings in his first year in office, remarking that such burning of "all the convents in Spain was not worth the life of a single Republican."⁵ This would continue in a soon-to-be civil war, where the Church, which sided with the right-wing faction, would be villainized by the left-wing faction. Understandably, remarks and actions such as these only promoted the discord between right and left wing groups leading to strikes, attempted coups, and violence.

After this troubled republic struggled through the scandalous and chaotic term of Azaña, a month before the national elections on January 1936, Azaña organized a leftist political faction called the Popular Front. Combining the Socialist Party, Communist Party, Esquerra Party, and Republican Union Party, they all sought to bring about social reforms, Catalan autonomy, and a stronger secular state.⁶

³ Jackson, Gabriel. "Multiple Historic Meanings of the Spanish Civil War." *Science & Society*, vol. 68, no. 3, 2004, pp. 272–276. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40404187.

⁴ Simkin, John. "History of the Spanish Civil War." *Spartacus Educational*, Spartacus Educational, Sept. 1997, spartacus-educational.com/U3Ahistory47.htm.

⁵ Simkin, John. "Manuel Azaña." *Spartacus Educational*, Spartacus Educational, Sept. 1997, spartacus-educational.com/SPazana.htm.

⁶ Simkin, "History of the Spanish Civil War." *op. cit.*

Consequently, right-wing politicians formed a political faction called the National Front. This was primarily comprised of CEDA and Carlists, who opposed economic reform and secular sentiment, with some even yearning for a fascist system – a grim foreshadowing to the years ahead with Francisco Franco.⁷ After months of bickering and scheming by both Fronts, a group of right-wing officers led by Emilio Mola and Francisco Franco staged a coup to overthrow the democratically elected republic, immediately transforming the broken, desperate state into a militant one as well.⁸ With each side being too frail to fight on their own and lacking territorial and economic leverage, they both heavily relied on two tactics throughout the war to strengthen their agenda: external aid (the physical weapons) and propaganda (the artistic weapons).

As for external aid, some powers decided to openly advocate for the Republican or Nationalist faction, while some decided to give aid clandestinely or ignore the conflict completely. Some powers found the Spanish war to be an ideological clash between newly adopted beliefs – like communism and fascism – while others yearned to keep the peace on the European stage after a costly and deadly World War. For these reasons, the Spanish Civil War has been dubbed a “dress rehearsal” for the Second World War in our international history, as it proved to be a proxy war for European behemoths to test their weapons, secure their stance, and boast their power.⁹ Though a Non-Intervention Pact was signed in London in August 1936 among various European leaders, various governments in that pact would soon break it. Most notably, Germany and Italy failed to honor the agreement, sending a variety of aid to Franco’s Nationalist Spain – most notably supporting his rapid offensives across northern Spain near the Ebro, leading to non-contiguous Republican land regions throughout the war and assisting his Army of Africa to fight on mainland Spain.¹⁰ This included many foot soldiers, artillery pieces, tanks, and planes, most notably the infamous German Condor Legion, who would bomb the small Spanish town of

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ United States Holocaust Museum. “Spanish Civil War.” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2021, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/spanish-civil-war.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Tutor2u. “International Involvement in the Spanish Civil War.” *Tutor2u*, Tutor2u, 19 June 2021, www.tutor2u.net/history/reference/international-involvement-in-the-spanish-civil-war.

Guernica.¹¹ To a lesser extent, Portugal and the Vatican would advocate for the Nationalists, but the latter primarily did so through propaganda, calling the secular Republic “illegitimate in origin, usurper of power, traitor to the Fatherland, [and] enemy of God.”¹² Support for the Republicans came primarily through the Soviet Union and Mexico, which gave ample funds, guns, aircrafts, and soldiers, and France, which only gave aid via covert means and would later back out. Other than official state actors, the most famous aid came from volunteers who worked in a variety of fields to support the faction they chose, from transportation to medics; the Nationalists were predominantly backed by thousands of Moroccan Arabs Regulares and Latin Americans excluding Mexicans, and the Republicans were backed by thousands of International Brigade volunteers (like the American Lincoln Battalion and the Canadian Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion) and Spanish militias (such as the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo [CNT] and the Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification [POUM]).¹³

Propaganda was used throughout the war, but it proved more versatile than bullets and bombs: it could be used for a variety of purposes like promoting political ideals while discrediting opposing ones, dehumanizing and villainizing the opposition, or influencing international opinions. Propaganda posters came to be one of the most influential aspects of the war, conveying vivid testimonies inside and outside of Spain. Propaganda posters varied in nature of production; some were officially produced and worked on for weeks, while others were ad hoc in nature as supplies such as paper were depleted towards the end of the civil war.¹⁴ For the sake of my review, I will be looking at pieces that epitomize the qualities of propaganda previously described; I will refer to figures that will be attached at the end of my essay.

As the war waged on, it became evident that extremist political ideologies such as communism and fascism were heavily promoted by external powers like the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany or

¹¹ United States Holocaust Museum, op. cit.

¹² Spain Then and Now. “The Catholic Church and the Spanish Civil War.” *Spain Then and Now - Spain Then and Now. An Overview of the History, Literature, Architecture, Art and Culture of Spain.*, Spain Then and Now, 2009, www.spainthenandnow.com/spanish-history/civil-war-and-the-catholic-church.

¹³ Van Wynen Thomas, Ann, and A. J. Thomas. “NON-INTERVENTION AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR.” *Proceedings of the American Society of International Law at Its Annual Meeting (1921-1969)*, vol. 61, 1967, pp. 2–6. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25657707.

¹⁴ Vergara, op. cit.

Fascist Italy, respectively. The ensuing propaganda of each of these factions ultimately dictated the nature of political discourse and even policy within respective constituencies, proving to be a decisive factor in partisanship and political strife during the war, similar to the recent First World War.¹⁵ Early political influences of outside of Spain made their imprint at the genesis of the Spanish Civil War. Shortly after the war's outbreak, the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture instituted a decree that land owned by separatist, or Nationalist, sympathizers would be handed to Republican peasants – adopting communist or socialist standards. In response to new reform, Valencian artist Josep Renau made a poster for the Republican government reading “Campesino: Defiende Con Las Armas Al Gobierno Que Te Dió La Tierra” (Peasant: Defend with Weapons the Land the Government that Has Given You) (Figure 1.a). This art depicts a hardy Republican peasant painted red, wielding a both a sickle (demonstrating communist traits) and a rifle, reading “decreto” (decree), referring to the contemporary Republican reforms. The rifle's bayonet stabs a vile, vulnerable snake labeled “propietario faccioso” (factious landlord), a common symbol of the malicious caciques (political bosses) and other authoritarian forces.¹⁶ Through such, Renau effectively strengthened the portrayal for communism, or at least left-wing political groups, making the opposing right-wing fascists look vulnerable and incapable of rising to the challenge of the fervent Spanish peasant populace. Simultaneously, Nationalists wanted to stand their ground to make their ideologies supreme amongst warring ones to people within and outside of Spain. As seen in Figure 2.a, an anonymous artist drew a hefty man in the early war, presumably fascist due to the bicorn on his head and the Nationalist Spanish flag in the background, sweeping away the Republican issues of Spain. The man sweeps away what is seen as clumsy, babyish Republican politicians, a Soviet hammer and sickle, and a variety of words including “bolchevismo” (Bolshevism), “injusticia social” (social injustices), “separatismo”

¹⁵ Riegel, O. W. “Press, Radio, and the Spanish Civil War.” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1937, pp. 131–136. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2744812.

¹⁶ Grass, Kacper. “Art of the Spanish Civil War: Political Propaganda and the Avant-Garde.” *DailyArtMagazine.com - Art History Stories*, Daily Art Magazine, 1 Apr. 2019, www.dailyartmagazine.com/art-of-the-spanish-civil-war/.

(separatism), and “FAI” (Federación Anarquista Ibérica, an anarcho-syndicalist political group).¹⁷ The fascist is sweeping away the implied mess of affairs the newly founded Spanish Republic has to later bring about glory to the Spanish fatherland. Through both of these posters, artists on both sides clearly promote the superiority and strength of their side with genuine, sturdy Spanish men (effectively making their political ideology the one for the average civilian) eliminating bumbling politicians or a vulnerable animal. Both convey the evident weakness to then be shadowed by the advocated political party depicted in their posters.

While some propaganda artists used their work to advocate for their political movement and demonstrate its power, others twisted their enemies into monstrous demons and other inhumane creatures to portray evilness and corruption – a tactic that would be used very frequently in major wars and politics to follow globally. Another anonymous Republican artist created a picture so gruesome and shocking, but clear in its message (Figure 1.b). As the text below the ominous figure reads “Reinare En España: ¡Que Te Crees Tu Eso!” (I Will Reign in Spain: You Should Believe It!), the Republicans emphasize that eminent enemy forces as vile as this will ravage the Spanish people once in power.¹⁸ As for the figure itself, it seems to be a graphic amalgamation of right-wing forces: the Catholic Church (miter), the Germans (swastika on miter), and Italians (Roman fascist sign on hanging bomb). The grim skeleton holds a rigid scythe, stained with blood, along with the skulls of innocent Spaniards. Through this poster, the Republic utilized dark, repulsive colors to generalize various right-wing forces as a deadly grim reaper figure to be wary of. In a similar fashion, Nationalists fought back to portray the Republicans as the greatest evil to Spaniards and mankind through a poster labeled “Jamàs” (never) by an anonymous Nationalist author (Figure 2.b).¹⁹ A giant red monster, which is presumably a representation of communism or the Soviet Union, lunges over a fiery valley to destroy the Spanish families and their

¹⁷ Clever, Molly. “Spanish Civil War, 1936.” *Teachwar*, WordPress, 21 May 2013, teachwar.wordpress.com/resources/war-justifications-archive/spanish-civil-war-1936/.

¹⁸ Pixtomenta. *Reinaré En España. ¡Que Te Crees Tú Eso!*, Blogger, spanishguerracivil.blogspot.com/2016/06/reinare-en-espanaque-te-crees-tu-eso.html.

¹⁹ Beloit College. “Soldiers.” *Virtual Wright Museum*, Wix, 2020, www.virtualwrightmuseum.com/soldiers.

village. A fascist soldier, again seen represented with a bicorn, stands valiantly amongst the innocent civilians, aiming his bayonet towards the communist juggernaut's face. Through this, the Nationalists are able to demonstrate communism as some external, unwelcomed evil trying to violate Spanish ground and traditions, such as the adherence to Catholicism. The Nationalists and Spaniards depict innocent Spaniards being ravaged by baneful, otherworldly entities (the skeleton and the giant) to demonstrate extremist political ideologies. These portrayals are masterfully complemented with a palette of vibrant colors, inherently defining the battle behind the presumed good and evil and strengthening the appeal to pathos.

The Spanish Civil War has been defined uniquely in history due to its ubiquitous nature; though predominantly fought on Spanish turf, volunteers and political powers worldwide duked it out on the Iberian Peninsula. Understandably, propaganda of its time would critique the far-reaching, international nature of this civil war and would use it to leverage the global opinions. One of the most famous, poignant pieces of propaganda and modern art, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (Figure 1.c), came from one of the most unfortunate, infamous bombings in Spanish history. On April 26th, 1937, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy sent their Condor Legion and Aviazione Legionaria on Operation Rügen, a mission to bomb civilians in Guernica to ease access of Bilbao and the entire northern Spain to Nationalist leader Francisco Franco. When the attack came, thousands of civilians in this humble village were killed by these elite military air forces – a site too frequently seen in Spain at the time.^{20,21} Pablo Picasso, an obvious Republican sympathizer, chose this Spanish city among many due to the nature of Guernica and the Basque region, the state in which it was located. Though this was not the largest among the cities he could have chosen, Guernica was the official seat of the Basque government, serving as a crucial symbol to the Basque region and identity; the yearning of Basque people for autonomy would have been eradicated under a Francoist regime. Moreover, Picasso spent his growing years in places such as Catalonia and

²⁰ United States Holocaust Museum, op. cit.

²¹ Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia. "Bombings." *Repensar Guernica*, 2021, guernica.museoreinasofia.es/en/story/bombings.

Galicia, both places with unique identities within the Spanish republic, making this bombing have a greater, emphatic meaning to him.²² He painted the monochrome *Guernica* in response to the fascist bombing to depict the true evils of war, especially with civilian innocents being the target of such, and to echo his anti-war testament to the international community when displayed in the 1937 Paris International Exposition.²³ The Cubist and Surrealist imagery with depicted a variety of figures: civilians like children and women were screaming and a bull (interpreted as a symbol of the cruelty of war) and horse (interpreted as a symbol of the suffering of people). These depictions are all shrouded with darkness, sorrow, and brutality; a forlorn, prophetic message to the Francoist era ahead and the chaos that would ensue in the Second World War.²⁴ When historians and students alike ponder upon significant products of the Spanish Civil War, *Guernica* comes to mind. This piece by Picasso perfectly encapsulates the turmoil and despair of the collapsing Spanish state, serving as a great, unchanging testament to our modern, uncertain world.

Undoubtedly, graphic design, art, and propaganda, serve a crucial purpose in our modern societies, especially modern Spain: its role is to relay certain positive or negative messages about contemporaries. Design can generally have a variety of functions, but with war comes different roles: some that are used to indoctrinate unsuspecting individuals to certain beliefs, some that are used to villainize and separate the supposed enemy, and some that are used to influence national and even global opinions. These posters demonstrated both the idealistic political romanticism and the crushing reality of war, forming powerful psychological realities for twentieth century Spaniards.

Artistic propaganda could be sourced on both political sides, including the individual political parties involved in each of them. However, the ones sourced from the Republican Popular Front seemed to have such a weight on modern day civilizations, whether they be sturdy or aspiring democracies. These

²² Artlyst. "Guernica 75 Years of Impact for Picasso's Greatest Painting." *Artlyst*, Artlyst, 22 July 2012, www.artlyst.com/news/guernica-75-years-of-impact-for-picassos-greatest-painting/.

²³ Ibis.

²⁴ PabloPicasso.org. "Guernica, 1937 by Pablo Picasso." *10 Facts About Guernica by Pablo Picasso*, PabloPicasso.org, 2021, www.pablopicasso.org/guernica.jsp.

pieces demonstrated the will of the Spanish people who yearned for their freedoms after decades of virtual imprisonment under their caciques, the strength of the Spanish people who stood up to the fascist beasts above them, and the innocence of the Spanish people who bled and suffered on occasion of the many bombings and attacks. With this, Republicans could effectively alienate their inhumane fascist “atrocities-mongers,” as famous British novelist and volunteer George Orwell phrased them, from the general innocent society at hand.²⁵ Although these pieces of art were successful in their individual realms, one may think that with the saddening fascist triumph in the end of the civil war, the Republican pieces would seem useless in action and not influential; after all, the Nationalists spent considerable less time and got less recognized in their propagandist efforts, but claimed victory of the Spanish turf. With this conclusion, I disagree. Taken out of the bloody, chaotic history, these posters could make no sense – simply being an assortment of inanimate objects and symbols molded together into a sheet of paper. However, in the context of the Spanish Civil War, these pieces speak and document actual people who had to live through rough tumultuous times. These had rippling effects upon the people they touched, going as far to affect the modern Spanish political climate due to ideological positions passed down from generation to generation, whether they be on separatist movements in Catalonia to Franco’s controversial Valley of the Fallen Catholic basilica.²⁶ Ultimately, art is what we make of it, and in regards to the Spanish Civil War, these designs are timeless and speak thousands of words about the mindsets of those before us.

²⁵ Orwell, George. “Looking Back on the Spanish War.” *The Orwell Foundation*, 26 Apr. 2021, www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/.

²⁶ Preston, Paul. “Spain Feels Franco's Legacy 40 Years after His Death.” *BBC News*, BBC, 20 Nov. 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34844939.

Republican Propaganda



Figure 1.a



Figure 1.b



Figure 1.c

Nationalist Propaganda



Figure 2.a

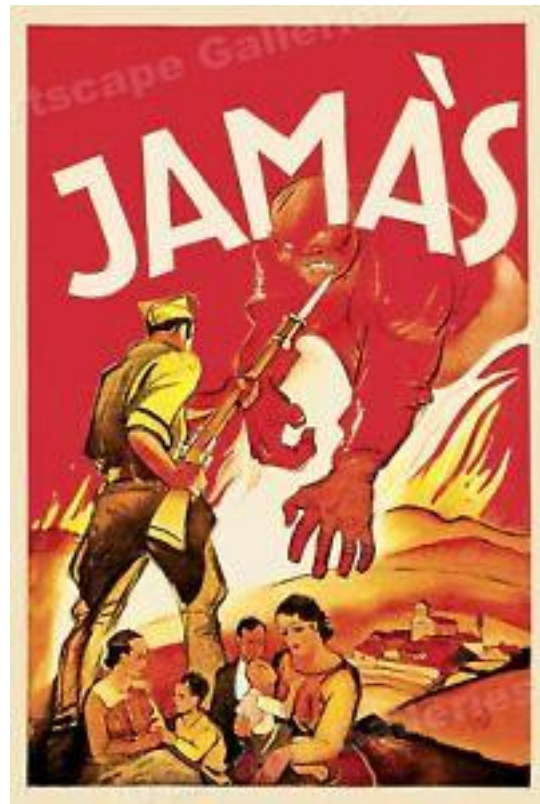


Figure 2.b

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