

Democracy, Deeds and Dilemmas: Support for the Spanish Republic Within British Civil Society, 1936-1939

Review Number: 2241

Publish date: Thursday, 17 May, 2018

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ISBN: 9781845198855

Date of Publication: 2017

Price: £50.00

Pages: 240pp.

Publisher: Sussex Academic Press

Publisher url: <http://www.sussex-academic.com/sa/titles/history/Mason.htm>

Place of Publication: Eastbourne

Reviewer: Edward Packard

The Spanish Civil War began in July 1936 when a group of right-wing military officers launched a coup against the democratically-elected and progressive Popular Front government. The plight of the besieged Spanish Republic prompted an international outpouring of political and humanitarian activism. However, the National Government in Britain adopted the official policy of non-intervention in an effort to quarantine the conflict. This embargoed the sale of arms to both sides, despite mounting evidence that the rebel generals were receiving considerable and ultimately decisive military assistance from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Non-intervention also failed to prevent sympathetic members of the British public from supporting the Spanish Republic until its defeat in April 1939. A relatively small number – up to 2,500 – volunteered to fight in Spain.⁽¹⁾ They were extraordinary. Most British people who supported the Republic did not set foot in Spain during the Civil War but engaged with various Spanish relief campaigns in their own communities. These activities have received extensive scholarly attention, particularly from Tom Buchanan.⁽²⁾ In *Democracy, Deeds and Dilemmas: Support for the Spanish Republic within British Civil Society, 1936–1939*, Emily Mason suggests that there still remains a great deal that has been overlooked or misinterpreted.

Democracy, Deeds and Dilemmas is a well-crafted and concise study of 1930s inter-war British society and popular political culture as filtered through the lens of the Spanish Civil War. It does not assess the overall impact of British support on the course of the conflict, but instead provides a fascinating overview of some of the diverse networks of public engagement and activism that existed across Britain during the turbulent 1930s. Through a judicious selection of vignettes, Mason demonstrates how events in Spain stimulated an expansive national conversation, including concerned discussions about the future of democracy itself. Much of the book's originality comes from its engagement with recent scholarship, but its central arguments are illustrated by a wide range of primary sources, including a broad selection of contemporary newspapers and periodicals, memoirs, and various organisational and private archives. Mason rarely dwells on a particular case study for more than a couple of pages, but they are sufficient to support the book's claims about the sheer variety of popular responses to the Spanish Civil War. On the other hand, while there is an effort to provide a broad geographical coverage, there does appear to be a preponderance of English examples.

Mason's starting point is the extensive debate surrounding the numerous Spanish relief initiatives that sprang up around Britain after July 1936, and whether these were primarily motivated by political solidarity with the Republic or humanitarian sympathy towards the suffering of its civilians. In exploring this dichotomy, historians – most notably Buchanan – have refuted Jim Fyrt's argument that the large number of grassroots campaigns to 'Aid Spain' were the closest Britain came to having an anti-fascist 'Popular Front'.⁽³⁾ Mason points out that much of this historiography has focused on left-wing politics with far less attention given to humanitarian responses. She correctly emphasises that supporters of the Spanish Republic were found across British society, not just on the left of the political spectrum, and they represented a heterogeneous assortment of beliefs and motivations. Mason also argues that humanitarianism often fused with wider political concerns and that these should not be treated as distinct elements in exploring popular responses to the Spanish Civil War. Individual views also developed and changed, sometimes significantly, over time. For instance, the peace movement faced an acute dilemma as the Civil War shifted against the Republic. Some of its members came to believe that 'war might be necessary to save peace', which led to an increasing number 'renouncing their pacifist position and calling for arms to be sold to Government Spain' (p. 65). Conversely, Sidney Dark, the editor of the *Church Times* and a pro-Republic activist, continued to support non-intervention in the firm belief that it would prevent a wider European war even though he recognised the importance of the struggle between fascism and democracy, and was certainly not indifferent to what was happening in Spain. Such biographical sketches appear throughout the book as a useful reminder to avoid oversimplifying or pigeonholing the views of 'ordinary' people, especially along partisan lines, while also providing a sense of the sometimes contradictory, and often confusing, forces that operated on individuals and groups in the late 1930s.

On first glance, Mason's focus on the diversity of British responses to the Spanish Civil War and the relationship between humanitarian and political motivations might not appear to offer much of a departure from Buchanan's earlier work. The originality of her approach lies in its engagement with debates over civil society in interwar Britain. The Representation of the People Acts of 1918 and 1928 widened popular democratic participation and led to new forms of political expression, including rising membership of party and non-party organisations. Mason specifically alludes to the work of Ross McKibbin and Helen McCarthy, who have offered contrasting views of associational life in Britain between the wars and the 'ownership' of democracy.⁽⁴⁾ She questions 'McKibbin's interpretation of the sorry state of interwar civil society', and finds more use in McCarthy's argument that associations developed 'active citizenship' and, in the case of the League of Nations Union, fostered a popular internationalism (p. 14). According to Mason, this branch of historiography has not paid much attention to British support for Republican Spain, and working-class participation in civil society has also been understudied. By addressing these gaps, *Democracy, Deeds and Dilemmas* offers a genuinely fresh perspective on 1930s British political culture and popular engagement with the Spanish Civil War, a conflict that 'captured the public imagination in Britain arguably more so than any other external conflict before or since' (p. 1).

The first part of the book is the most conceptually interesting, and explores how Britons from a wide range of backgrounds came to believe that there was something familiar and worthwhile about the Republican project in Spain. Mason argues that supporters of the Republic drew upon a popular 'shared historical consciousness about Britain's path to democracy' (p. 24) which meant that they felt almost duty-bound to assist the Spanish people in their fight for similar rights and values. She suggests that 'Spain was placed into a trajectory of British tradition, and seemed all the less threatening for it' (p. 25). This conception of Britain as the cradle of democracy was part of an invented national story with sufficient resonance and flexibility to rally people with opposing political views (and differing conceptions of what democracy actually meant) behind the Republic's cause. The focus on the struggle of the 'Spanish people' also moved the discussion away from the divisive rhetoric of class conflict as, for many Britons, the Civil War became 'not the battle of a hostile industrial proletariat, but of honest and hardworking men and women, children and families, simply fighting for a better life' (p. 31). Indeed, for Mason, the frequent association of the Republic with women, children, and families via the rhetoric and imagery of humanitarian appeals essentially domesticated the concept of Spanish democracy and made it more agreeable for non-radical British audiences. In a related

point later in the book, Mason suggests that the Co-operative movement's successful Milk for Spain appeal 'focused on the consumer rather than the worker, and may therefore have had a unique appeal to women as keepers of the domestic purse' (p. 98). This gendered angle is only briefly touched upon here, but would surely reward further research.

Democracy, Deeds and Dilemmas is not the first work to consider what the Spanish Republic signified to its British sympathisers. Buchanan has previously argued how popular constructions of a progressive 'New Spain', represented by the Republic, stood in stark contrast to a backwards 'Old Spain', and that left-wing support for the former relied upon this dichotomy.⁽⁵⁾ Mason sets about bridging this division by suggesting that, for its British supporters, the Republic represented both change *and* continuity with the past. This, she argues, appealed to many Britons in the 1930s because of the socio-economic dislocation and political uncertainties that followed the First World War and Great Depression, together with a related streak of 'conservative modernism' that 'permeated all levels of interwar society' (pp. 20–1). Amid the crisis of capitalism and looming threat of ideological extremism on the continent, 'many Britons sought a move into the future that would not represent a total break with the past' (p. 20). They sought to ensure stability through the conservation of traditions alongside the pursuit of modern progressive reforms.

In developing this argument, Mason highlights the Spanish Republic's agrarian reforms as a key component of the bridge between the old and new visions of Spain, with rural themes contributing to a sense of shared Anglo-Spanish tradition (contrary to the notion that Spain's agricultural 'backwardness' and large peasant population marked it out as fundamentally different to industrial Britain). Informed by rural historiography, notably Jeremy Burchardt, Clare Griffiths, and Alun Howkins, Mason explains how inter-war Britons, from across the political spectrum, adopted romanticised visions of the rural idyll as part of their national identity and projected these onto the Spanish countryside, thereby drawing a connection 'with a timeless and essential *idea* of Britain, which allegedly found its roots in the land' (p. 40). The documentary film *The Spanish Earth* (1937) was screened across Britain, and did a great deal to encourage pro-Republic views about the need for agrarian reform in Spain, while simultaneously demonstrating the connection between the Spanish people and the soil, and the perceived dignity of rural work. The idea that the land and the traditions it represented belonged to the people had a particular resonance when set against wider socio-political developments in 1930s Britain, such as the folk culture revival and the right to roam movement, while countryside pursuits, such as rambling, were used to raise funds for the Republic.

Entertainment and political engagement were sometimes two sides of the same coin, and Mason illustrates her argument about the importance of rural imagery and symbolism with various contemporary cultural forms, including films, novels, and poems. More broadly, she highlights an increasing democratisation of culture in 1930s Britain, 'marked by a greater sense of entitlement to participate in cultural activities, from amateur theatre to purchasing paperbacks' (p. 48). For Mason, this had two related impacts on British supporters of the Republic. First, it meant they could *mobilise* culture in a very broad sense, and engage ordinary people at a local level across Britain. Second, it helped to generate another resonant comparison between Britain and Spain, as both countries were presented as having rich cultural traditions both in the past and present. The Republic presented itself as the guardian of Spain's cultural heritage, ranging from high art to peasant folk dances. Conversely, Franco and his fascist supporters were seen, and portrayed, as an existential threat to the people's ownership and democratic production of culture.

Fascism also threatened the Republic's educational reforms, which not only aimed to reduce illiteracy but also inculcate democratic habits among the population, especially in rural communities. The documentary film *Spanish A.B.C.* (1938) delivered the message to audiences across Britain that the education of the masses was at the centre of the Republic's mission. Brian Shelmerdine has suggested that the film did little to change British prejudices about Spanish 'backwardness'.⁽⁶⁾ Mason counters that it probably had a wide resonance as, once again, events in Spain were filtered and interpreted through a British lens. For example, the Duchess of Atholl, the most prominent pro-Republican Conservative, supported educational reform in Spain, with Mason suggesting that this reflected larger concerns about uneducated voters in Britain after the expansion of the franchise. Mason contends that the growth of adult education in inter-war Britain not only

generated another parallel with the Spanish Republican experience, but also contributed to a burgeoning civil society in which ever-increasing numbers of people were encouraged to engage with, and reflect upon, international developments.

Democracy, Deeds and Dilemmas therefore establishes that British people thought about, and related to, Spain in a multitude of ways, and that the Republic became emblematic of the hopes and fears of significant elements within Britain's growing civil society. Within this context, the remainder of the book explores pro-Republic engagement and activism within pacifist, Co-operative, and Christian networks. Each section specifically challenges prior historiographical assumptions, such as the idea that British inter-war pacifism signified a broader disinterest in international affairs. Instead, Mason emphasises the 'complexity and plurality of peace movement responses' to the civil war (p. 51). The acute dilemma of how to save peace and defeat fascism gradually led some anti-war activists to reject their pacifism, but Mason suggests that individual decisions on this matter were based on a deep engagement with the international aspects of the Spanish conflict rather than apathy or isolationist sentiment. The next section focuses on the Co-operative movement, which had over eight million members in 1938. Mason rightly points out that historians have neglected its important role in inter-war civil society and its hugely significant support for the Republic. Many British co-operators felt a degree of solidarity with the fledgling Spanish Co-operative movement, which was imperilled by Franco. Indeed, the onset of fascism in Italy and Germany had resulted in the crushing of the movement in those countries. The final section on Christianity, which includes the sharply titled chapter 'No faith in fascism', argues that Christian support for the Republic was more widespread than is usually acknowledged, and reflected specifically Christian forms of pro-democratic and anti-fascist thinking.

These sections are innovative for their focus on the ways in which these networks provided opportunities within 1930s British civil society for democratic engagement and critical debate on the question of Spain and the wider threat posed by the rise of European fascism. Some of this took place through specialist newspapers and periodicals, which are cited extensively, while meeting halls across the country provided important spaces for the face-to-face exchange of ideas and mobilisation of opinion. For example, the Co-operative movement provided the newly-enfranchised working class with a range of educational opportunities, including lectures and film shows, as well as social events. These not only helped raise funds for Spanish relief, but demonstrated a popular willingness to learn about, and discuss, the issues at stake in the Civil War. Mason concludes that this showed 'ordinary people actively engaging as citizens both locally in their communities and, arguably, on an international level as citizens of the world' (p.108).

Owing to the Co-operative movement's large membership, and the local flavour of many of its societies, it did not speak with one voice on Spanish issues, not least because 'co-operation meant very different things to different people' (p. 85). Some Catholic co-operators dissented from the movement's support for the Republic. The Women's Co-operative Guild was aligned to the Peace Pledge Union, but its rank-and-file members frequently questioned the absolute pacifist position. For women co-operators, 'the stakes were raised by the fact that fascism posed a specific threat to their rights and freedom as women', but not all anti-fascist women necessarily rejected absolute pacifism (p.94).

Supporters of the Republic encountered a diverse range of alternative views through participation in broader 'Aid Spain' activities. In a striking example of this, Mason outlines how the Hampstead Peace Council worked with the local branch of the League of Nations Union, the Hampstead Ethical Society, Hampstead Left Book Club, and local Labour and Communist parties to organise a 'Spain Week' in 1938. More broadly, young activists appear to have been particularly willing to support broad-based and cross-party humanitarian efforts in support of the Republic. On this point Mason draws attention to the activities of the neglected and arguably misunderstood British Youth Peace Assembly, which formed an important nexus for bringing together a variety of youth groups from a range of organisations. The Assembly's president, Percy Timberlake, described a 'bewildering medley of activists' aged under thirty, united by a desire to bring about change (p. 80). Significantly, some young people conceptualised their support for the Republic in the language of international youth solidarity, in a similar manner to the way in which some members of the

Women's Co-operative Guild 'framed their humanitarian contributions in terms of solidarity with their Spanish "sisters"' (p. 105).

British Christian responses to the Spanish Civil War were at least as complex and heterogeneous as those of the peace and Co-operative movements, at a time when religion still played a significant role within civil society in Britain. Moving away from the traditional argument that anticommunism led many Christians to support Franco's crusade against the godless 'Reds', Mason sheds fascinating new light onto the debates among Christians, including clergy and congregation, who supported the Republic. While anti-Catholicism was sometimes a factor for Protestants, Mason notes that some Catholics supported the Republic owing to concerns about the influence of fascism on their religion. In keeping with the book's central theme, however, the situation was rarely clear-cut: in Liverpool, for example, working-class Catholics expressed their opposition to the Republic, but nonetheless supported, arguably for humanitarian reasons, the successful Merseyside Foodship campaign which assisted those living in Republican territory.

One of the key questions for Christians was whether or not 'Marxist materialism or pagan fascism [...] posed the greater threat to Christianity' (p. 120). In response, Christians from a range of denominations conceptualised and debated anti-fascist positions on both political and theological grounds. Some sought to demonstrate the links between democracy and Christianity. For example, the Reverend Alan Taylor Dale, a Methodist, argued that Christians should strive to make democracy 'the political expression of the spiritual principles proclaimed by Jesus' (p. 123). Others sought to negotiate a relationship between Christianity and socialism. In a letter to her minister, a Nonconformist from Kent wrote of her son, an atheist and communist: 'it seems to me that the things he wants are just the things Christ would want' (p. 125). The Spanish Civil War folded into these wider conversations about democracy and the role of Christianity in shaping a fairer society, and prompted political as well as humanitarian support for the Republic.

While *Democracy, Deeds and Dilemmas* is predominantly a national overview of British support for the Spanish Republic, Mason does provide a sense of how local and regional concerns influenced specific individual and group responses, and how communities developed their own meaningful connections to international events. This book will hopefully act as a departure point and framework for more detailed local studies in future. Besides potentially elaborating on Mason's interesting ideas on youth and women's responses, further research in local archives might also help to reveal more of the motivations of the masses of relatively casual or informal supporters of the Spanish Republic, rather than the more committed activists who have left more obvious traces in the historical record.

Appropriately enough, *Democracy, Deeds and Dilemmas* has appeared in time for Britain's 'Vote 100' commemorations of the 1918 Representation of the People Act. It is also a timely and resonant study in light of present-day activism and debate concerning the meaning and ownership of democracy in the age of Brexit, and of continuing popular discussion about Britain's place in European and wider international affairs.

Notes

1. Their story has received an excellent treatment in Richard Baxell, *Unlikely Warriors: The British in the Spanish Civil War and the Struggle Against Fascism* (London, 2012). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge, 1997), and *The Impact of the Spanish Civil War on Britain: War, Loss and Memory* (Eastbourne, 2017). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. The classic works in the debate are Jim Fyrth, *The Signal Was Spain: The Aid Spain Movement in Britain, 1936–39* (London, 1986), and 'The Aid Spain Movement in Britain, 1936–39', *History Workshop Journal*, 35 (1993), 153–64; and Tom Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge, 1991), and 'Britain's Popular Front?: Aid Spain and the British Labour Movement', *History Workshop Journal*, 31 (1991), 60–72. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For a review of this debate, see Helen McCarthy, 'Whose democracy? Histories of British political culture between the wars', *Historical Journal*, 55 (2012), 221–38. [Back to \(4\)](#)

5. Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War*, pp. 8–36.[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. Brian Shelmerdine, *British Representations of the Spanish Civil War* (Manchester, 2006), p. 128.[Back to \(6\)](#)
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