

SPAIN IN SEARCH OF ITSELF

The English poet W. H. Auden described it as "that arid square, that fragment nipped off from hot Africa, / soldered so cruelly into inventive Europe." Auden's characterization of Spain is only a gentler version of a typical European condescension that survived right up until recent years. "Africa begins at the Pyrenees," announced the 19th-century French novelist Alexandre Dumas, snidely implying that Europe ended there. Indeed, the period labels by which we usually chart Western European history—Renaissance and Reformation, Enlightenment and Industrialization—seem largely inapplicable to Spain. Its tradition has been one of isolationism driven by some form of authoritarian rule and stiffened by a powerful Catholic Church. This has earned Spain a reputation for stagnation and backwardness, one that for much of its history it has deserved.

But Spain has not always lagged behind its neighbors to the northeast. It was, after all, the first nation to enjoy a "golden age," building an empire of a scale unseen since the days of Rome. In *Spain and Its World, 1500–1700* (Yale, 1989), John H. Elliott, a professor of early modern history at Oxford University, suggests that 16th-century Castilians saw themselves as successors to the Romans, "as a chosen, and therefore superior, people, entrusted with a divine [Catholic] mission which looked towards universal empire as its goal." But that self-perception included a fatalistic belief in inexorable decline. As Elliott notes, no thinking Spaniard could avoid asking the question: "If all great empires, including the greatest of them all, had risen only to fall, could Spain alone escape?"

Elliott points out that Spain's decline was not so much a national as a Castilian failure, resulting from the crown's inability to rid itself of "imperial delusions." Spaniards have long lived with the weight of an extensive bureaucracy, one of the legacies of the Austrian Hapsburgs who gained the Spanish throne when Charles I (later Holy Roman Emperor Charles V) succeeded his grandfather, Ferdinand, in 1516. The wealth of empire was reserved almost exclusively for the crown, but so was the burden of managing it.

Sixteenth-century American possessions "made it possible for Castile to sustain itself as the dominant world power, but at an economic, administrative, and psychological cost which only slowly became apparent. . . . In fact, empire had become a psychological burden which made it almost impossible to think in realistic terms about the changing international situation." The result was one expensive war after another with contending European powers.

Historian Richard Herr's *The Eighteenth Century Revolution in Spain* (1958) stands as the best work about a thoroughly neglected century in Spanish history. Despite the challenge of new political ideas from abroad, notably liberalism, Spain remained united beneath, and loyal to, the crown and the church. As Herr shows, the mercantilist policies pursued by Madrid resurrected the economy and for once favored the peripheral maritime provinces, such as Galicia and Catalonia, making the state more self-sufficient and actively encouraging the exportation of surplus goods. The provinces responded with a new loyalty to throne and country. And "by keeping progressives from hearkening to anti-Christian extremists in France," Herr says, "their religious faith prevented the entry of the Enlightenment into Spain from destroying the spiritual unity of educated Spaniards. . . . The nationalism that imbued Spaniards from all over the peninsula at the end of the century had as its rallying cry 'Religion, King, and Country!'"

But throughout the tumultuous 19th century—what historian Adrian Shubert in *A Social History of Modern Spain* (Unwin Hyman, 1990) calls "an unbroken litany of short-lived governments, military coups, and civil wars"—Spain suffered a progressive deterioration of national identity. In *Spain, 1808–1975* (Oxford, 1982), Oxford historian Sir Raymond Carr resists blaming this decline on any one of Spain's paradoxes, "its traditionalism or its revolutionary individualism, its extremism or its static conformism." Instead, he points to Spain's slow economic and industrial develop-

ment. Out of insufficient wealth, he says, emerged persistent regionalism and finally separatism, as Catalonia and the Basque country started to go their own ways as independent states. If Spain had become a prosperous and progressive nation, Carr writes, "all would have 'utilized' the Spanish state and found their interests in the general prosperity of the union."

This instability led finally in 1936 to the Spanish civil war, fought between the Popular Front—a coalition of Left Republicans and Socialists—and the Nationalists, a fascist movement backed by the military and led by Generalissimo Francisco Franco. George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938; reprinted by Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1969) remains perhaps the best personal account of that bloody war. Orwell, who fought for a year on the Republican side, bore grim witness to both the political and human realities of the conflict: "Outside Spain few people grasped that there was a revolution; inside Spain nobody doubted it."

The nature of the revolution, the complicated ideological conflict of the war, and its outcome receive scholarly treatment in Hugh Thomas's epic work, *The Spanish Civil War* (1961; reprinted by Harper & Row, 1986). Thomas concludes that while Franco "ruled regally, according to no theory save his own style of compromise . . . between Falange, Church, army, monarchists, and industry," and while Spain remained "politically immobile" for more than 30 years, it still became one of the countries that "will be seen to have had its industrial revolution under the aegis of an authoritarian right-wing regime."

There is little doubt that Franco's death in 1975 was the event most crucial to the democratic transition of the late 1970s, but it was not the only necessary factor. In *The Return of Civil Society* (Harvard,

1993), Complutense University of Madrid sociologist Victor M. Pérez-Díaz relates that liberal tendencies among the educated elite began to emerge by the late 1950s. The real change was in the mentality of the Francoist establishment, "a realization of the failure of the corporate, authoritarian, counter-reformist, and autarkic aims incorporated in the idea of a 'well-ordered' society. . . . From that moment on, it became increasingly evident that such an ideal did not constitute a credible scenario for the future of Spain."

Despite the rising tide of liberal and leftist sentiment after 1975, including among Francoist defectors, the extreme Right was still a force to be reckoned with, particularly because its power was grounded in the military. University of London historian Paul Preston, in *The Triumph of Democracy in Spain* (Methuen, 1986), argues that to avoid a catastrophic clash between Left and Right, "it



Las Meninas (1656) by Diego Velázquez

was essential that . . . the introduction of democracy . . . meet with the approval of the armed forces and the bulk of the old guard." The result was that the Francoist constitution remained in force until 1978 and that the transition took place within its framework. Meanwhile, the other partner in the regime, the Catholic Church, redefined its role completely. As Adrian Shubert points out, the church has always wanted a national Catholicism, a popular identification of Spain as a nation largely defined by its ties with the Catholic Church. So by the time of democratic transition, the church had not only forsaken its alliance with the Francoist "crusade," Pérez-Díaz says, "but it began to ask the people's forgiveness for having failed to avert the war."

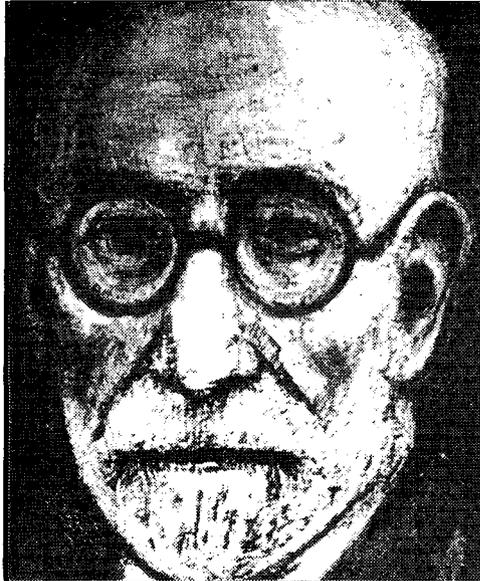
The years before and during the democratic transition were uncertain, to say the least, but it was not a time of political upheaval or revolution (apart from an abortive military coup in 1981). The triumph of democracy in Spain was that nation's first instance of political success by way of moderation, compromise, and even toleration between Left and Right. What this meant for the liberal opposition, Preston argues, was a string of sacrifices: "Hopes of significant social change were shelved in order that the urgent immediate goal of political democracy might be secured." The post-Franco reformers, who were educated in the burgeoning liberalism of the 1960s, seemed to possess a nonradical, democratic "sense." Pérez-Díaz argues that the political elites "were successful not because they were able to lead the public but rather because they were able to learn from and follow the public mood." The fulcrum of Spanish political stability was no longer the rigid, counter-reformist ideology of monarchy or dictatorship, but instead the fluid, liberal ideas of a new generation.

The first of Spain's recent economic revivals actually preceded the political transition, and it might have had more significant consequences for Spanish society. Journalist John Hooper, in *The Spaniards* (Viking, 1986), cites a fairly typical case from the 1960s and '70s—a man who had started his working life as a shepherd but ended up an electrician on

the *Talgo*, the Spanish-designed and -manufactured super train: "He had gone from poverty to prosperity, swapped the most rudimentary job imaginable for one that required a high level of technical sophistication, and moved from a cottage in the hills to a neat three-bedroom flat in a block with fitted kitchens, modern bathrooms and a swimming pool." By the time the first "miracle" ended in the winter of 1973–74, Spain was the world's ninth industrial power.

Still, it is hard to overstate the psychological costs of the civil war and Franco's reign. In *Out of the Past: Spanish Cinema After Franco* (British Film Institute, 1986), author John Hopewell explains the flowering of Spanish film in the last decade as part of a national struggle to forget the war and its legacies. The war itself and the Francoist "peace" of the 1940s and '50s "left many in a permanent state of evasion, of absence from reality. . . . Filmmakers [such as Luis Buñuel and Pedro Almodóvar] and critics broke with dominant film styles in an almost neurotic and thoroughly understandable attempt to start from scratch, to dissociate themselves from a damned and damning past." If anything, says Hopewell, the Spanish tend to think of the past as "a tragedy for which no one is responsible. . . . Spanish filmmakers tend to portray it as if, even at the time, it were already determined." In this, they seem not unlike their 17th-century ancestors: heirs to a fatal destiny.

In *Barcelona* (Knopf, 1992), critic Robert Hughes returns to Orwell's Catalonia, in part to determine the extent to which Spain has shed its Francoist character. Hughes quotes the grandson of Joan Maragall, a turn-of-the-century poet and Catalan separatist, to illustrate Spain's current predicament: "After nearly 40 years of Franco's insisting that *his* ideology was the essence of Spain, that everything else was foreign and un-Spanish, Spain must (as it were) re-Hispanicize itself, draw a self-definition that includes openness." Indeed this is Spain's challenge: to transcend its closed, authoritarian history and create a new identity that will allow the "miracle" nation of the 1970s and '80s to become a major player on the European and global stage.



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