“Literary Journalism and Civil War Reportage and Civil Wars through the Ages”

A Conference Report from Malaga

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John S. Bak, Université de Lorraine

Various scholars working on ReportAGES, the literary journalism and war project begun five years ago, convened for the project’s fourth international congress, held this year in the Communications Faculty of the University of Malaga in Spain. Given the conference theme on literary journalism and civil war, Spain seemed a fitting country to host the conference.

Co-organized with Antonio Cuartero, a recent PhD from the university and an active participant in the ReportAGES project, the conference welcomed two keynote speakers and nineteen presenters, the majority of whom teach at Spanish universities.

While it seemed strange at first that the conference would draw more Spanish colleagues than foreign ones, the reason soon became clear during the lively, and sometimes heated, discussions: talking about the Civil War has long been a sensitive issue in Spain, just as it would be in any country that turned brother against brother in battle. What these animated debates revealed is that, today, the Spanish can – and, moreover, desire to – talk about their Civil War, the history of which has been captured more by the countless foreign war correspondents and writers who covered part of it, from Orwell to Hemingway and from Gellhorn to Parker, to name just a few.

And yet, many of these celebrated foreign writers did not speak much Spanish, nor did they really understand the historical context responsible for the war, which was much more complex than the simplistic fascist/communist binary that was repeatedly presented. Still, each of these foreign authors used direct dialogue in their literary journalistic books or dispatches, dialogue that could have only come from a translator – or from their own imaginations. This was one of the main arguments presented by Alberto Lázaro (Universidad de Alcalá), whose keynote talk, entitled “Crónicas inglesas de la Guerra Civil española: entre el periodismo, la historia y la novela,” opened the conference.

Only now, as we approach the century mark of the Civil War, are the Spaniards willing to talk about the atrocities the nation visited upon itself. Most of the colleagues present had a relative who fought and died in the war, and not all were fighting on the same side. The healing process is still underway in Spain, and this conference revealed just how much longer that healing will take. The following is a selection of the various point of views presented during the two days.

Much discussion centered, of course, on how the Spanish press covered the war. Aurora García González (Universidade de Vigo) looked at how the northern paper, Voz de Galicia, reported on the war, while Juan Tomás Luengo Benedicto (Universidad de Málaga) discussed el periodismo radiofónico from the local Radio Málaga-EAJ 9 in the south, a city that was a Republican stronghold up until its defeat in February 1937; the radio station was soon seized by the Fascists and used as a propagandist mouthpiece for the Nationalists.

One specific battle – or massacre, since it is considered one of the cruellest and most violent moments of the Spanish Civil War – was the topic of two talks in a session entitled “The Battle of Badajoz and the War Press.” Manuel João de Carvalho Coutinho (Universidade Nova de Lisboa) discussed a young Portuguese journalist, Mário Neves, whose 1936 reportages for the Portuguese newspaper Diário de Lisboa were the last to appear before censorship was enforced by Portugal’s own dictator, António Oliveira Salazar, who was
aligned with Franco. Clara Sanz Hernando (Universidad de Burgos) next studied various crónicas published in the dailies Diário de Noticias, Diário de Lisboa, Diário da Manhã and O Século to demonstrate how the media was one of Salazar’s main weapons to discredit the defenders of the legitimate Republican government and extol the insurgents.

There were also the inevitable discussions of various foreign correspondents, male and female alike, whose reportages contributed to the international community’s understanding of what was to be the prequel to the Second World War. Working from Kapuściński affirmation that there is no real journalism without empathy with the Other, Juan Francisco Plaza (Universidad Loyola Andalucía) compared the war correspondents Faulques and Folwer in two literary works, El pintor de batallas by Arturo Pérez-Reverte and The Quiet American by Graham Greene, to discuss the modern war reporter’s role when faced with issues of implication vs. neutrality and empathy vs. indifference. Celia Wallhead (Universidad de Granada) then presented her consortium’s current research project on comparing the testimonies of various literary journalists of the Spanish Civil War and their various biographers’.

Dolors Palau Sampio (Universitat de València) also looked in the war testimonies of Martha Gellhorn, while Renée Lugschitz (Universidad Miguel Hernández de Elche) discussed the work of several foreign female war correspondents of the Spanish Civil War, who found narrative journalism a more appropriate medium to capture the horror of the war as it was visited upon the civilian population? Literary journalism, she argued helped these women authors to establish their niches among the male-dominated contingency of war reporting.

José Ruiz Mas (Universidad de Granada) then compared Kate O’Brien’s Farewell Spain (1937), a book about her experiences in the Basque Country in the 1920s and on her pre-war journeys in central and northern Spain in the 1930s, with The Times’ reporting on the siege of the Alcázar of Toledo, a symbol of Spanish Nationalism. He argued that the information on the siege and defense of the Alcázar (July 5–September 1936) that O’Brien included in her book did not always coincide with that provided by The Times, a newspaper she favored because of its alleged “neutrality.” Her reflections and interpretations of the Spanish Civil War, and more specifically of the siege of the fortress as a key war event in the early days of the conflict, are mainly based on journalists’ accounts of British left-wing foreign correspondents, and not exclusively on The Times.

War testimonies as literary journalism would preoccupy the research of two other presenters. Antonio Cuartero (Universidad de Málaga) explored the crónicas of Manuel Chaves Nogales, one of the main figures of Spanish literary journalism, focusing on his book A sangre y fuego, a collection of nine reports and chronicles on the conflict that portray the authentic stories and tragedies of Falangists, anarchists, Republicans and insurgents alike. Javier Sánchez Zapatero and Manuel González de la Aleja (Universidad de Salamanca) discussed the work of the British press and contributions from some of its most controversial volunteers and correspondents whose work, today housed in 68 boxes in the Documentary Center of the Historical Memory of Salamanca, offers in terms of a detailed vision of what these newspapers believed were the causes of the war. Their case study was on Keith Scott Watson’s dispatches for the Daily Express and his resultant testimony about the war, Single to Spain (1937).

While the Spanish Civil War preoccupied the majority of the talks, civil wars past and present were not entirely neglected. Víctor García González (Universidad de Málaga) talked about war and the press during the reign of the Spanish King Felipe V, and María Galán (Universitat de València) compared journalistic texts produced by professional correspondents, including Peter W. Alexander and Felix G. de Fontaine, with those penned by Confederate soldiers, who collaborated sporadically with various newspapers during the American Civil War.
If we consider that in certain parts of the United States, there is still a lingering resentment over its Civil War a century and a half ago, it could very well be a while before Spain will fully recover from its war. Consider the fact the several Southern states in the U.S. are only now removing the signs of the Confederacy, be it flags on government buildings in Georgia or statues of Confederate generals in New Orleans. Though Franco is largely a persona non grata in Spain today, there are still many Spaniards who still believe in some of the ideas he had espoused.

And as we turned our attention from the civil wars in Spain and the U.S. to those more recent, be it Bosnia or Syria, what was discussed was just again how little we know about the wars and their historical contexts from the people involved. These witnesses could not give an accurate portrait, so heavy is any state or insurgent propaganda during a war, and foreign correspondents once again have to rely on their wits, translators and sometimes their imagination in trying to present to a largely ignorant Western reader just what is happening there, or has happened, and why.

Like her colleague, Lucía Ballesteros Aguayo, who looked at the targeting of children through cartoon books steeped in Francoist ideologies, Natalia Meléndez Malavé (Universidad de Málaga) discussed Joe Sacco’s graphic book Safe Area Goražde (2000), based on the oral histories of his interviewees over a period of four months he spent in Bosnia in 1994–95 during that country’s civil war. And Manuel João de Carvalho Coutinho gave the second of his two talks on Scott Anderson’s “On the Syrian Civil War (2016), a reportage about the Arab Spring and the resultant migrant crisis.

Mirta Núñez Díaz-Balart (Universidad Complutense de Madrid) closed the conference with a second keynote speech about the legacy of Spanish literature and journalism in the pursuit of maintaining a balance in the documenting of the Spanish Civil War.

By the conference’s end, it was universally agreed that literary war journalism continues to be one of the most efficient means in capturing the available truths of war. Because of its long-form attributes (column space to provide context and commentary and not just hard facts and death tolls, and immersion reporting to allow time to verify facts), literary war journalism can provide a more accurate and nuanced reading of the wars that history will only tell in decades to comes, if it tells them at all. Sadly, what history will perhaps recall of the Syrian Civil War will be the mass immigration it caused throughout Europe, more than the geopolitical complexities responsible for the war.

One final conference, on the literary war journalism of Pacific Rim nations (including Oceania, China and Russia), is being planned for 2019. §