

TRIBUNA

The collective memory of recent past and challenges ahead

Jordi Font

Director of MUME

The armed civil conflict of 1936-1939, after the failed coup d'état of 18 July 1936, gradually became an open war where two armies were fighting to take territorial control over the entire peninsula. Meanwhile, for a period of a few months, the geographical division implied the consolidation of two rearguards. In both areas, acts of extreme violence were committed against the population. So much so that some historians would use the pun "war on civilians"¹ when describing the criminal ferocity, used on potential enemies. In the rebellious, or self-declared *national*, camp, assassinations obtained a systemic status, as it was understood to be one of the ways to achieve the political objectives; in the republican camp, which was legally and democratically established, the institutional collapse, consequence of the war, allowed a revolutionary movement to gain strength in some areas, as was the case in Catalonia, where the political ideas of some of its factions understood that social transformation was only possible through the physical elimination of, what they considered, the enemy of their class. This polarisation, embodied in mass killings and persecutions of all kinds, resulted in forced population displacements of considerable size during the conflict. In the end, people fled to avoid the harshness of a relentless repression.

One could say that, when looking at the population movements in detail, we can distinguish three significant moments during the war period. In first place, during the revolutionary months of the beginning of the war, around 50,000 persons² moved and fled to safer places. While the conflict lasted, some looked for shelter in fascist Italy³, but also in France, or they went to the Spanish city of Burgos, with the objective of

enlisting in the fight against the Republic. The second moment became evident, starting in the spring of 1937, when the war starts to turn in favour of the rebellious troupes, supporters of the coup. As more territories were conquered and the subsequent repression grew, the Catalan rearguard was transformed into a shelter for hundreds of thousands of refugees from other areas of the Spanish State ⁴. The Catalan administrations and civilians put in a gigantic effort. Around 600,000 refugees arrived to find an exhausted rearguard, without any supplies and submitted to cruel air strikes. Finally, in February 1939, in only a few days, there was a huge population displacement. Almost half a million people, coming from different parts of the Spanish State and the Catalan Principality, crossed the French-Spanish border to arrive to France, a country that was officially reluctant to supply humanitarian care to this stream of people in need. As was written, in an ironic tone, by the journalist and writer Arthur Koestler (*The scum of the earth*, 1941), the first thing France would have done in its combat against fascism was to follow its example, creating closed internment camps, where people lived in humiliating conditions.

“ How can a historical event, as extraordinary as the Republican exile, have been overlooked in most memorial narratives during the period between the transition to democracy and today?

”

The Republican defeat started a long period of exodus. A painful diaspora from which many will not return. In reality, with a duration of almost four decades, the Republican exile can be considered a paradigm of contemporary European history. Nevertheless, even if historiography ⁵ has taken this period increasingly more into consideration as subject of study, the question we need to ask, even if there is no easy answer, is: How can a historical event, as extraordinary as the Republican exile, have been overlooked in most memorial narratives during the period between the transition to democracy and today?

As a reply, we could point out that the long timespan of Franco's dictatorship, along with the effectiveness of its propagandistic rhetoric, would have contributed to the loss of political and symbolic impact of the exile. Also, most of the nearly 180,000 people – of whom probably one quarter originally came from Catalonia – who remained in exile for a long period, chose to start a new personal and professional life. The consolidation and international acceptance of the Francoist regime did not inspire optimism, nor did they promote the option of returning. Moreover, also the generation issue played an important role. Even if the role of the anti-Francoist militants who had stayed behind, forged in the struggles in factories and universities, would become increasingly more important, they found themselves at great distance from their political leaders in exile. They no longer spoke the same political language. During the final stage of the dictatorship and the subsequent transition, even if exile remained a reference and a key point for logistic support, the reins of political change were in the hands of the main emerging groups of internal opposition, as well as those of the reformers inside the Francoist movement, who ended up joining the pact. Exile, associated with the disruptive and traumatic memories of the war, became the subject of a weak and short-lived vindication during the derogation of Francoism. Then followed the years of voluntary amnesia, when the time was there to join the Single Market (predecessor of the European Union) and NATO. The eighties were not a good period to state a historical claim in favour of the values embodied by exile.

“ The implementation of collective memory policies has made it possible to value the period of exile; it has given new life to the memory of its actors and their descendants ”

At present, after the wave of memorials that started at the turn of the century, the recollection of exile has gained weight in the public discussion in our country. The changing political circumstances and conveniences could not erase the fact that exile had allowed to maintain the democratic legitimacy of the republican institutions. In the

case of Catalonia, this has been quite obvious through the recovery of the Generalitat (Catalan regional government) after it institutionally survived the exile period. As such, the implementation of collective memory policies has made it possible to value the period of exile. It has given new life to the memory of its actors and their descendants. However, the passing years are transforming the “living connection”⁶ of this memory (the generation that was exposed to it or to which it was passed on directly) into history or myth. The worst that could happen to the public vision of this memory would be to be dressed in a nostalgic tone of topics and sacralising, acritical idealisations; in other words, it would become just another myth. The memory that persists and that has been built from this massive exodus needs to be considered an object of critical historical study, and not a mystification, because precisely this is the best antidote to strengthen the democratic memory.

“ Being reunited with a critical recollection of our exile needs to help us to get closer to each other, with increased empathy for the millions of refugees and displaced persons of today ”

As a consequence, strict historical knowledge needs to be transferred to society. Far away from myths, a mature democratic society needs to know, as pointed out at the start of this essay, that violence against civilians was not exclusively the work of the participants of the coup, although it is essential to stress the differences and intentionality of both opponents in the conflict. Moreover, awareness of the fact that the Catalan society delivered a great effort, hosting refugees from the Basque Country, Madrid, Andalusia... can also be an incentive for some modern societies who, with many more resources, are unable, with some rare exceptions, to adopt an attitude of solidarity towards humanitarian problems which can be seen at the gates of Europe nowadays. And, finally, the fact that fellow citizens of two or three generations ago have suffered the misfortune of exile in their own skin leaves us in a position of equality with those who suffer it today. Many challenges with respect to this memory lay ahead – among

others, the recovery and dignifying of the missing bodies – , but placed in the field of exile conditions, one of the most relevant matters is that being reunited with a critical recollection of our exile needs to help us to get closer to each other, with increased empathy for the millions of refugees and displaced persons of today, deprived of a decent life. Sometimes, when looking at the present international scene, it seems we find ourselves in front of the new version of the “Non-Intervention Pact” of the European powers during the Civil War or reliving the 1938 Évian Conference⁷, where the same Western States were too insensitive to host Jewish refugees, trying to escape Nazi Germany. As stated by Walter Benjamin, who died in exile due to precisely this international indifference to the fate of refugees, the revival of the past should be used to transform the present.

1. Javier Rodrigo, “Guerra al civil. La España de 1936 y las guerras civiles europeas (1917-49)”, in Javier Rodrigo (ed.), *Políticas de la violencia. Europa, siglo XX*, Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza, 2014, p. 145-190.

2. Jordi Rubió Coromina, *L'èxode català de 1936 a través dels Pirineus*, Barcelona: Editorial Gregal, 2015.

3. Rubèn Doll-Petit, *Els catalans de Gènova. Història de l'èxode i l'adhesió d'una classe dirigent en temps de guerra*, Barcelona: PAM, 2003.

4. Julio Clavijo Ledesma, *La política sobre la población refugiada durante la Guerra Civil, 1936-1939*, Doctoral thesis, University of Girona, 2003.

5. Jordi Font Agulló & Jordi Gaitx Moltó, “L'exili de 1939. Un estat de la qüestió entre dues commemoracions (2009-2014) in *Franquisme & Transició*, 2, 2014.

6. Marianne Hirsch, *La generación de la posmemoria. Escritura y cultura visual después del Holocausto*, Madrid: Editorial CarpeNoctem, 2015.

7. Enzo Traverso, “Las paradojas de la crisis europea” in *Viento Sur*, nr. 145, April 2016.

Photography : MUME / FONS Raymond San Geroteo. Fragment de la imatge del Portús, al costat de les mugues frontereres, feta des del costat català. Foto New York Times.