

The Portrayal of the Role of Women in the Republican Political Propaganda during the Spanish Civil War

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ABSTRACT

The liberation of women is a popular topic among many leftist and liberal groups, advocating for a variety of feminist idealism ranging from suffrage to participation in workforce. During the civil war, the political propaganda of the Republican side used the image of women, showing their participation in the war efforts many times. This paper analyzes the posters aimed at women or using women's images and the publicity of anti-fascist women's associations during the Spanish Civil War. When demonstrating female's participation in militia or work in factories or rural areas, people use a masculine image; the portrayal of women became soft and aligned with traditional gender roles when it came to nursing and logistics. Although the war advanced gender equality, women were still considered as playing a secondary and subservient role in traditional family and social structure.

Key Words: Spanish Civil War, political propaganda, women, equality, militia, feminism

1. INTRODUCTION

In times of crisis, we need to use various propaganda tools to attract people's attention. What I am talking about is not just political propaganda, but in the election campaign during the war, it is accompanied by the explosion of thoughts and expressions, which usually do not occur in the context of social and political "calm". This is similar to how in times of economic crisis or sales decline, companies will also increase activities to attract customers' attention.

As for political propaganda, it is a very important weapon, for example, when attracting and persuading those who are not very clear about their voting intentions during the election, but it is also a way to publicize and report underlying problems in society, which may still be hidden for some people in society. They either do not have convenient ways to obtain political information, or they are not interested in events until they are noticed in some way. Therefore, during the Spanish Civil War, for a large part of society, publicity helped to inform people to a certain extent, using a variety of means, such as posters, pamphlets, postcards and radio messages. During the Nationalist's siege of Madrid, the Republican forces even used radio to call for the withdrawal of families, especially women and their children, and also to encourage men to join the Republican Army to protect the city from invaders.

During the Spanish civil war and the post-war period, poster production was mainly pro-Republican (David). This was because of the fact that many authors came from the business field and copied the technology they used in the business field. To boost patriotic sentiment among the public, they mainly used radio stations to make political speeches, but they also made propaganda posters during the war and later, against the Franco dictatorship. Posters and leaflets not only helped to understand the politically-uneducated public to gain a better understanding of different political ideologies at that time, but also mobilized women in Spanish society by depicting the role of women in Spanish society at that time, the society's traditional expectation on the feminist group, and the inequality they had to face in a traditionalist society.

The discourse on women was very different because of the ideological trend it produces. On the other hand, there is also the work done by Pilar Primo de Rivera and a special section on women (Esenwein). They portrayed women as valuable family members that could contribute significantly to the Republican's war efforts in propaganda. According to their statements, social services enabled many women to leave their own circles and understand and engage in different activities, such as sports. On the other hand, it is important to thoroughly examine the voices of feminists at that time. Most of them fought for freedom and demanded women's basic social and political rights. But here, we should also distinguish different types of speeches, from the instigators of anarchists to the most moderate among some socialists and communists.

By examining the standpoint on feminist issues on both sides, it is reasonable to come to a conclusion that discrimination, though to different degree, existed throughout the entire Spanish society. It is undeniable that inequality and injustice against women have occurred and continued to occur after the war, even on the Republican's side because

not only from the fascist camp, but also from many Republican departments, people try to put women in a secondary position, laugh at their role in the army, while in the meantime, making use of them for the war efforts.

During the war, women launched a war in the rear, participated in the resistance movement, and continued to suffer from changes in family, family and work. Their army undertook political commitments, but they did not cut off the reins of families in rural, poor areas.

Their ability as a precious labor force in factories, their working conditions, and wages were highly unstable.

The analysis of the situation of women during the Spanish Civil War will be mainly based on two aspects: on the one hand, the poster of the Republic war aimed at women or using women's images to shape a progressive image and attract more supporters; on the other hand, the political propaganda of the Anti-fascist Women's Association, established in 1934, which was composed of anarchists, communists, socialists, republics, Basque Catholic republics and non-politicized women (Grutka). The first aspect mainly depicted women as active supporters of men on the battlefield: women can take over men's role in factories and other crucial occupations. The propaganda by Anti-fascist Women's Association was much more radical, as women participated in every role that men were able to do, including soldiers, espionage workers, and even leadership roles, such as army officers and political leaders.

2. Women on posters of the Spanish Civil War

Spanish posters originated from advertisements for bullfights and employer gatherings, and they were originally produced in studios in Barcelona and Valencia. Then, there began to have factories and shops, which would use this method to advertise their products.

The process of producing a poster was as follows: the poster producer draws, draws or writes his poster in the studio. Once it is finished, it is taken to the workshop. A literary cartoonist copies it on the printing plate, and then starts the real printing. The cartels were influenced by the vision, ideology and personal conditions of life as artists and as people when implementing his works. Therefore, at the beginning of the conflict, this advertising form was quickly applied to the motives of revolution and war, but eight months later, the poster lost its quality and dramatic effects, probably because the artists themselves suffered from the incarnation and defects of war as time progressed.

3. Characteristics and functions of War Symbols

The perfect tools for effective political propaganda in wartime were posters, newspapers and radio. On the poster, the image and slogan must be mixed together, because their main role was to convey what happened in the frontline and at the homefront to guide the actions of civilians. The problem they faced was that daily news reports did not cover all places, and posters were mainly used in big cities such as Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia. Therefore, radio has become a very important information weapon because it reaches a wide range of places and the enemies had no means to stop people from receiving information via radio. Therefore, despite the fact that communicating solely on sound was not as effective as using imagery, radio played an irreplaceable role during the Spanish Civil War. The following image is an advertisement for one of the many radios during the war to advocate on behalf of the Republicans.



Another way to spread information during the civil war is through songs, poems and legends, about heroes and heroines on the front line, fighting and bombing, refugees. This method is easily accessible and memorable. An example of a Civil War song involving women is as shown in the following lyric of the song *Free Women* (Malim):

*Fists upraised, women of Iberia
towards horizons pregnant with light
on paths afire
feet on the ground
face to the blue sky.*

*Affirming the promise of life
we defy tradition
we mold the warm clay
of a new world born of pain.*

*Let the past vanish into nothingness!
What do we care for yesterday!
We want to write anew
the word WOMAN.*

*Fists upraised, women of the world
towards horizons pregnant with light
on paths afire
onward, onward
toward the light.*

Spanish cartelism experienced an explosion of creativity in the early days of the war. At first, it was the author of the commercial cartel who took over the baton and devoted himself to sending a propaganda message against fascism and defending the government of the democratically elected Republic.

Some authors pointed out that there were two different aspects in the production of Republican posters involving women. On the one hand, the posters of official, trade union and political party organizations produced by its propaganda department, whose main role was to improve women's political awareness; this was why the image of working women was combined with that of revolutionary women commonly seen in leftist propaganda. On the other hand, there are posters made by Free Women, the only feminist organization in Spain in 1936; they combined the image of women in the rear with the slogan of social revolution, and embody the goal of proletarian feminism.

4. Improving the social status of women through posters

The situation of women during the war was obvious on many posters at that time. From those who portray the image of the militia revolution to those who reflect the pain of the mother who fled the bombing, the poster gives people a very detailed picture, allowing people to see the role of women.

Women gained the right to vote in 1931 in Spain, and as a consequence, political parties began to turn their election campaigns to new female voters. However, some people objected to this because people thought that women have no intellectual capability to understand political issues (Nash). In the poster shown below, in which three propaganda elements are mixed: on the one hand, women exercising their right to vote; on the other hand, the electoral propaganda of the Popular Front and finally the amnesty for the prisoners imprisoned in the political suppression that took place in October 1934.



Although in this revolutionary era, women began to leave their small circle, a minute but disruptive image began to be used in republican posters. However, deep down, they continued to support women's submission to the patriarchal and traditionalist social system. This new model did not represent a new woman emerging from a new sociopolitical context, but rather, an artificial image of women was created to cover the needs of women's support that arised, both in times of elections and in times of war (Nehta).

4.1 The Militia

The case of the militia women was a clear example of how propaganda can transform discourses and opinions in a short period of time. Anarchists were the first group that allowed and even encouraged women to actively join the struggle as militiamen. In addition, an important campaign was carried out in the newspaper *Frente Libertario* to enlist women in the war, launching slogans and plastering the streets with propaganda posters. But it is necessary to clarify that the motivations for going to the fighting fronts were not only political, since a very important part of them had other reasons such as accompanying their relatives, children and friends and even to avenge a close relative's death. They fought on the Segovia front, where a women's battalion was created, but also in Catalonia from where they sent a female battalion to defend Mallorca, in Asturias female battalions can also be seen, and one of them became the chairman of a machine gun company (Preston).

During the first months of the conflict, they were a symbol of the fight against fascism. They were represented with a modern image; they were young people dressed in their blue overalls proletarian work uniform, and carrying a rifle. What was intended to achieve was a complete revolution of the established order, in which women were subordinated to patriarchal power and achieved the right to equal status. They not only fought on the fronts but were also in charge of haranguing the men to go out into the streets and enlist in the army.

With regard to the militia women, it should be noted that the division of tasks was also repeated at the front, seeing women relegated to performing tasks of their own, such as washing clothes, cooking and carrying out sanitary functions. Contrary to this idea was the testimony of a militiawoman named Fifi, who stated that she never had fear in the front in that she never feared the assault of any companion. She also explained that she was the one who cooked the food, but not because she was a woman, but because the men were much slower and they could not afford to waste time and go hungry. Although Antonia García, a communist and anti-fascist activist, affirmed that sexual harassment was frequent and she confirmed the fact that "men are communists, socialists or anarchists from the waist up."

In this sense, the "eugenic message to women" spread by the anarchist Doctor Félix Martí was curious, in which he stated that the withdrawal of women from the fronts could help reserve energy for the effort warlike; thus, the duty of women would be to facilitate continence, sexual discipline and harmony in erotic relationships. It seems that it was not only the fascist discourses that saw women as a kind of 'demon' lying in wait for the 'poor soldiers'. This concern was the target of a major awareness campaign, and there were numerous posters dealing with the issue of venereal diseases. As shown in the poster below, in which one can see a combatant with his head hanging and a very pale woman, in an affectionate attitude and whose skeletal hand surrounds the soldier's waist, representing illness and death.



In October 1936, Largo Caballero established a series of provisions to remove women from the front and move them to the home front, arguing as an excuse that the battlefield was not a suitable place for a woman and that they were not prepared to be part of a structured, well-organized army. In an instant, the militia women went from being glorified to being ridiculed. But it must be made very clear that not only had the fascists criticized these women because they did not fulfill the role assigned to them, but also some unions, parties and even women's organizations acknowledged the need to move women away from frontlines. This can be seen in 1937, when the communists managed to create a regular army, eliminating the militias and without even contemplating the presence of female soldiers in it.

4.2 Rear: Women's work in rural and urban areas

M. Andes said in 1936, "in the first few days of the uprising, women realized that there was an urgent need to improve the enthusiasm of those who went into battle. They took up arms and joined the battle with the same or greater courage as men (...) The battlefield was covered with the blood of brave women, who joined the militia to oppose the enemy's attack (...) Women performed their duties (...) But the priority now is to return to the rear and work in industry, commerce and offices. The progress of the country should not be interrupted by the lack of male weapons to promote its economic development, which must be supported by women (...) On the home front, all the women are working. This should be our official position. Follow him, cheers! "

In any armed conflict, the home front is a key factor, because there, economic and productive activities ensure housing, food, health care, weapons production... Those are all factors that significantly affect the course of war and can be crucial to winning a war. Propaganda is once again a tool that is used to educate people about important information and raise public awareness. Political propaganda in this field provided some very intriguing contradictions about the role of women: although posters and speeches called for the ever-increasing importance of role of women working in the home front, what was equally important was these speeches aimed at assuring men that jobs undertaken by women would return to men's hands after the end of armed conflict. In all war societies, female labor is used to make up for the casualties caused by men enlisting in the army. The slogan "men in frontline, women behind" will be used by most political parties and women's associations. With the increase in the number of women in employment, people began to demand equal pay for equal work with men, recognize women's professional ability, the right to technical and vocational training, and the need to establish assistance networks to get women out of traditional family work.

The messages used in the posters oriented to the work of women in the rearguard are curious. In the poster below, works on the home front are represented by those tasks considered as typically feminine, and those jobs women carried out both inside and outside of their homes. In a way, this poster can be considered progressive and feminist, but it did not completely break the chains on women imposed by the patriarchal society.



In poster 6, a worker is represented who is capable of moving the machinery gears alone, although, yes, under the supervision of a man. It recognizes the capability of women but still considers women to be inferior to men to some extent.



Poster 7 encourages women to overcome their work and represents her in different tasks. It also introduces the image of a woman with a sickle, which symbolizes women role as a workforce in the field.



The activities that were carried out in the home front were of a very diverse nature, although it was necessary to differentiate between the work that was carried out in urban and rural areas. In the cities, women took charge of nurseries and care centers for the children of combatants and women workers; blood hospitals were also created where women did health work and accompanied sick soldiers. Females in hospitals dedicated themselves to making clothes — especially in the winter campaigns, when they worked diligently in the arms industry; there were tram conductors, purses and those in charge of supplying the troops. The so-called 'godmothers of war' who corresponded with the

soldiers at the front became fashionable. This role, which was created by the women of the Republican Left and by the communists, was heavily criticized by *Mujeres Libres* because they saw it as a traditional and bourgeois symbol. Although initially, these tasks were of little importance, in March 1937, a decree was promulgated, establishing a salary for these activities.

With regards to the work of women in rural areas, the truth was that the situation did not change much during the war period, since rural women were working in agriculture and livestock even before the conflict began, in addition to taking care of the family and domestic work. During the war, the role of women in the rural countryside did not change much at all. One of the few things that may seem surprising was images of women driving tractors. Shock Brigades were created which, normally on weekends, were in charge of helping with the work in the fields, promoting the farming of farmland, and also attempting to indoctrinate modern cultural values to the peasant women by teaching them general culture classes.

In these two posters below, symbols were used to glorify women's participation in the war. The sickle was a symbol of the union of the peasants, whose idea originated from the communists. The wheat represented the fertility of the land and the bright future that awaits once the victory of the revolution is achieved, and thirdly, the rifle extended above the soldier's arm symbolized the heroic armed revolt against the oppressor. Those symbols were traditionally associated with men, but it was believed that women were just as capable as men during the war (Roberta).



Although women were productive both in the industries and in the fields, it was actually one of the most recurrent themes of the posters of the time. There are many posters referring to the health and educational work carried out by women on the front lines and in the rear. In the blood hospitals and in the homes set up for refugee children, the maternal image of the woman who cared for the wounded soldiers and the orphaned child appears, as if they were her own children and relatives.

The problem that arose regarding the work of women in the rearguard was that after all the wars, women, after replacing men at work, had no choice but to give back the position to their husbands and brothers. What accompanied men's return was the traditional and castrating role of queens of the home.

4.3 Bombing and civilian flight

Posters and photomontages that referred to the bombings or the need to evacuate a city were normally represented with the image of a woman with a gesture torn by pain and with a child in her arms or holding her hand. It was not surprising that women were chosen as the object to carry out this type of campaign because they were supposedly the 'weaker sex' and it was more moving to see a woman in a similar situation. However, it should also be noted that in the cities, the number of women exceeded that of men, since many were at the front or had died in combat, and it was to women that a propaganda campaign had to be launched so that they would leave the cities.

In the example below, people can see a group of women with their children hand in hand, walking through the snow, with the few goods they could collect before fleeing their homes. But, the huge male hands appear, which represent the shelter and protection of the Delegate Board of Defense and the legitimate Government of the Republic. Women still appeared alongside male companions.



It should be noted that in addition to Spanish and Catalan, posters were made in other languages. This circumstance can be explained by the need to inform the rest of the world of the situation in Spain at that time. In addition, the international brigadistas, such as Gerda Taro who fought in the Catalan Front, or Marion Merriman who belonged to the Lincoln Brigade, were a key element because, thanks to them, the need to unite in the fight against fascism was made possible by those who casted their social network across the rest of Europe.

The Ministry of Propaganda made the following poster in three languages - Spanish, English, and French. With its slogan "What are you doing to prevent this?", the gray tones and the composition of the images were intended to stir the consciences of the viewers and encourage the enlistment in the republican ranks of foreigners. However, the Non-Intervention Committee signed by France and England in August 1936 and ratified by 27 other countries stopped support for the republican government — he only received help from the Soviet Union and Mexico. In addition to the support of the International Brigades, the International Red Aid, which had its headquarters in Paris and which channeled the help of trade unions, labor organizations and political parties of the international left, represented for the Spanish Republic an example of solidarity of the working class from all over the world, the world in its fight against fascism.



Other posters, such as the one shown below, were intended to encourage rearguard workers and the government to build more shelters to prevent situations like the one depicted from occurring (Samth). A young girl, dressed in a white outfit — a symbol of purity — stained with blood, falls dead on the cold gray ground, from the attack of the fascist weapons. The power of the gray bombs — ‘adorned’ with fascist symbols — contrasts with the delicacy and paleness of the girl who lies dead.



5. Women in the political propoganda of the Association of Anti-fascist Women (AMA)

The Association of Antifascist Women, or AMA, was founded in 1934, and it was made up of communists, socialists, republicans, Basque Catholic republicans, and non-politicized women. Although it represented a multi-party character, it was criticized above all by the anarchists, since the Communist Party exerted enormous influence over the association because both the leadership, as well as its programs and policies, had a clear communist orientation. In 1938 the Executive Committee recognized that the AMA's propoganda had neglected women who were not affiliated such as housewives, wage workers and intellectuals. So messages began to be sent to 'capture' women belonging to these groups.

Emilia Elías held the position of General Secretary of the National Committee of the AMA and specified the following points in her political program:

1. Fight against fascism
2. Form a national alliance of women.
3. Fight for peace.
4. Fight for the defense of the culture of women and the right of all children to have an adequate education.
5. Fight for the right to freedom, to express oneself freely and to self-determination.
6. Fight for Equal justice for all.
7. Incorporate women into political and social life
8. Liberate women from overwhelming motherhood.

Although many points were established in this program in favor of women's equality, the AMA maintained that the Civil War was not the most appropriate time to promote a true revolutionary change regarding the situation of women in society at the time and based its actions in the fight against fascism and the defense of the legitimate government. Thus, fascism was portrayed as an enemy for the family, as a symbol of slavery, and as a humiliation for women (Thamton). Only a small group dedicated themselves to the fight against women's problems and inequalities; however, they focused on the labor field, targeting issues such as salary discrimination and maternity leave.

During the war, women began to occupy positions that had been reserved for men and men saw their partners as a threat to their future work. The unions and political parties had to intervene, but to reassure the men, it was stressed to them that it was a transitory situation due to the need for labor in the home front, not to defend a revolutionary change in the situation of women.

Dolores Ibárruri Pasionaria, president of the AMA, represented a symbol of the tragedy of mothers in the Civil War and advocated the need for women to have a certain autonomy and independence as the basis for their emancipation. She even went so far as to point out that they had to live according to their husband and their children. However, she also devoted her efforts to reassuring male workers who felt fearful that women were 'usurping' their jobs, explaining that it was only a temporary situation and that when the war was over the women would give them their jobs back.

With the outbreak of the war, Pasionaria carried out an important political propaganda campaign that increased her fame in Republican Spain; Nieves Torres was in the sewing workshop where Pasionaria worked in 1936 and explained that “on November 7, we all thought it was the end of Madrid. The only thing we could think of was that the fascists were going to enter the city. Then Dolores shouted: They will not pass! She said it to the soldiers, to the rearguard, to everyone, and everyone got up and said, no, no, they will not pass, we have to defend Madrid tooth and nail!” In Paris 1936, she adopted another of her most famous slogans of the war, "Better die on your feet than live on your knees." Pasionaria was named Honorary Commander of the Fifth Regiment and in her speech of thanks she harangued the troops — the men — with the following words: “If (the fascists) triumph and (send you) to the concentration camps, you can imagine what your wives and mothers will tell you: weep like women, because you did not know how to fight like men” (Nash, 1976:137)

At the Conference of Antifascist Women, held in Valencia in October 1937, a series of claims were made to improve the condition of women in general: the integration of women in the labor force, wage equality, the creation of a structure of canteens, nurseries and collective facilities for child care (Salim). Although all these measures sought more to achieve a true anti-fascist commitment to the work of women in the rear than to claim a change in their situation. The main source of conflict in this Conference was that the union participation of women and their militancy in the ranks of the Communist Party were privileged and that their main slogan was to promote work in the rearguard.

The Second National Conference of Anti-Fascist Women was held in Valencia in October 1938. The advertising poster exposed the idea of plurality that the Conference should have, calling on women workers, peasant women, intellectuals, young women and women of other associations so that they present their problems, aspirations, and claims. In addition, what was sought with this meeting was that "in the midst of the war against the invader, we must show the whole world that we know how to make ourselves worthy of our brave fighters, that we want to put ourselves at the forefront of the fight, but that we want to win with our own effort". The fact that they had to show if they were 'worthy' was striking, but more striking was that they had to be for the 'brave fighters', is it that the work of women in the rear was not worthy and essential enough?

In this Second Conference, peasant women were encouraged to join industrial work. The need to raise their cultural and professional level and improve their sanitary conditions was exposed in order to reduce infant mortality in rural areas. What was not very clear is that had the peasant women got engaged in the industries, who would carry out the work in the traditional field? Much of the work of the Anti-Fascist Women's Association was related to the military. They dedicated themselves to washing the combatants' clothes, visiting the wounded in hospitals, handing out flags to the different regiments, and serving as war godmothers for the soldiers. All these activities represented a repetition of the roles and stereotypes that women had to face in their daily lives.

In the opinion of Carmen Grimau, the most important characteristic of communist posters was that they represented women as a model figure with a clear Soviet inspiration because of women's discipline and dedication to the struggle, freedom from the slavery of bourgeois society and the circumstance that women occupied a privileged space. The image shown on the following poster made for the Western Sector of the Communist Party showed that the intention of the International Conference of Women was to fight against fascism and in favor of peace (Esenwein). A strong-complexioned woman dressed in work overalls is shown, determinedly raising a hammer, with the silhouette of factory chimneys in the background.



CONCLUSION

As verified throughout the work, the Republican posters of the Civil War that were directed at women or that used their image can be classified into two categories.

On the one hand, those that refer to the militias, to the work of women in factories, or in those sectors in which men were more represented. In these cases, a masculinized image of women was frequently used. The woman usually appeared dressed in pants or overalls with very expressive features and a robust body. In addition, texts were used in which it was intended to provoke men by appealing to their manhood and virility.

On the other hand, the posters that refer to the bombings, to the requests for help, even to women in the rear — nurses, seamstresses, caregivers, educators., etc (Thamton). In these cases, the image was softened and dramatized since the woman was supposedly weaker and more submissive. It was sought to provoke compassion and solidarity. It was very common for the image of a mother to appear with her son, precisely to get more attention.

It was paradoxical that the work of women at the front was praised, and that, in a short time, the tables turned and the militia women ceased to be heroines (Thamton). Why, if at first these women were valued and respected, was it decided to withdraw them from the fronts? Why didn't they let them decide for themselves and adopt a paternalistic and dictatorial attitude? The question of unpreparedness did not seem very justified when seventeen-year-old boys whose experience in war could not be greater than that of these women were forced to enlist.

The idea was maintained that the country cannot be stopped because the men — drivers of the economy gear — had their place at the front. So, as something exceptional, it would be women who would occupy the jobs left by men. What was not understood is that if the women showed that, although the male arms were lacking, the country could move forward, their work would be considered as something secondary and temporary, since the men would return to their jobs when the war ended, relegating the woman to the house.

With Franco's victory, women were once again relegated to the traditional houseworks, such as caring for the house and children, and a few privileged women could work outside the home, albeit in activities that were considered feminine. Other than the Nationalists, a large part of the republican politicians maintained an equally fascist attitude towards women, and did not believe that they had capacities beyond their domestic tasks. In addition, taking into account that the government itself and the unions allowed women who worked outside their homes to do so in worse conditions and with lower wages than men, it cannot be said that the idea of equality and solidarity that the Popular Front always used in its speeches was truly achieved.

The Association of Anti-Fascist Women maintained that fascism was the worst enemy of families, of homes, of women, that it would mean humiliation and a return to the patriarchal and authoritarian system had the Nationalists won, but had this really ever disappeared on the Republican's side? From what has been seen, it seems not. Although in some exceptional situations, women held positions of responsibility, fought at the front, demonstrated that they were capable of doing the hardest jobs, that they had political initiative and that they were interested in receiving educational and cultural training, apart from dedicating themselves to their domestic work and family, for many men, women were still second-class citizens.

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