

Emily Beuter

December 7, 2018

Prof. Greg Shaya

History 208: Europe in the Era of Total War

The Power of Plays:

Understanding the Spanish Civil War through Theater

Poet and playwright Federico García Lorca penned the words “Long live the revolution!” for a play he was writing before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936.¹ Unfortunately, Lorca did not live to finish his play, or see the revolution play out in Spain. Nationalists forces arrested and killed Lorca at the beginning of the war. While his play would remain unfinished, Spain wrestled a bloody three-year struggle with the Nationalists coming out as the victors. Even though Lorca did not see the outcome of the struggle, his play reflects and anticipates the tensions that ruptured with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

This paper explores the question, what does Lorca’s play reveal about Spanish society before the outbreak of the Civil War? Lorca’s play demonstrates the kind of tensions that shaped Spanish society before the Civil War and seems to foreshadow the Civil War. Further, Lorca’s play points to specific class and ideological tensions. The play shows the importance of cultural history. In addition to Lorca’s play, I use the historical monograph *The Spanish Republic and Civil War* by Julián Casanova to provide context for this paper. Together, these works illustrate the underlying pressures that would erupt during the Spanish Civil War.

¹ Federico García Lorca, *The Public and Play without a Title: Two Posthumous Plays*, trans. Carlos Bauer (New York: New Directions, 1983), 66.

The Second Republic was established in 1931 after the overthrow of the Spanish monarchy and dictatorship of Primo de Rivera. Economic and societal changes accompanied these government changes, especially with the impact of industrialization and urbanization, all of which Casanova calls the “winds of change.”² The first two years of the Republic were characterized with “great hopes, reforms, conflicts, and resistance.”³ There was a reordering of the army, church and state relations, and reform in work and agricultural. With newly empowered lower classes because of these reforms, strikes and protests were rampant. There were backlash and early insurrections, which Casanova views as the government’s inability to fully or successfully implement its legislation.⁴ The influence of the Catholic Church was weakened by industrialization, urban growth, and “class conflict.”⁵ Anarchists, communists, and other anticlerical groups along with the state attempted to weaken the church which Casanova says only instead produced Spain’s first large right-wing party.⁶ Amidst the changes happening in the Republic’s early years, fascism and communism failed to gain mass support, unlike other countries in the 1930s such as Germany.⁷

However, the Republic did fall prey to extreme changes after its first few years. The composition of the government was a tug of war between the Left and Right and their varying coalitions. The goal was a government of the center, but instead there was an increasingly fragmented parliament and loss of the Center.⁸ In addition to the growth of polarization in the

² Julián Casanova, *The Spanish Republic and Civil War* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 9.

³ Casanova, 39.

⁴ Casanova, 55-57

⁵ Casanova, 65

⁶ Casanova, 64

⁷ Casanova, 81.

⁸ Casanova, 94.

government, there was violence by various factions which showed the loss of confidence and legality of the Republic.⁹ In 1936, a Popular Front won the elections in Spain. Unfortunately, the Right retracts with a military coup.¹⁰ This would begin the brutal struggle to determine who would rule over Spain – the Spanish Republic or the side of the military, the Nationalists.

Initially, the military generals who planned the coup thought the conflict would be quick, but this did turn out to be the case. Instead, the conflict developed into total war in that anyone could be killed due to his or her beliefs or associations.¹¹ Violence and terror were used by both sides, but the military rebels used a greater degree of violence. Casanova affirms this in that the murder by the military rebels was not so much as to “serve a lesson” but rather to completely get rid of the “society and system of freedoms that they defended.”¹² The killings were also “a reflection of class repression.”¹³ The Nationalists killed thousands of people with leftists’ views or believed to harbor leftists’ sympathies.¹⁴ The Spanish Civil War was a war fought not only on the battlefield, but also on the home front.

International aid played a significant role in the Spanish Civil War. The Spanish Civil War was “an international war” and there was aid in both terms of arms and financial support.¹⁵ Germany and Italy heavily aided the Nationalists with troops, air squads who bombed civilians, and financial support. On the other hand, Western democracies such as France or Britain did not aid the Spanish Republic and instead signed a non-intervention pact, which actually gave validity

⁹ Casanova, 111

¹⁰ Casanova, 123-125.

¹¹ Casanova, 162f.

¹² Casanova, 182.

¹³ Casanova, 188.

¹⁴ Casanova, 118.

¹⁵ Casanova, 212.

to the rebels by legally recognizing them as the same plane as the Republic.¹⁶ The only country to help the side of the Republic was the Soviet Union, but their aid was limited to sending old, outdated weapons. The Soviet Union did not heavily support the war because they did not want to lose its alliance with Britain and France. The international intervention also came with ideological consequences. German and Italian aid came with the unintended consequence of the growth of Fascism in Spain.¹⁷ The Civil War became a struggle between Fascism, Communism, and Democracy. International intervention by Germany and Italy played a decisive role in the Civil War, both in terms of winning the war and the ideological outcome in Spain.

There were also internal factors that contributed to the outcome of the Spanish Civil War for both sides. On the Republican side, there was a counter-revolution and the disagreement between those who wanted to continue the war versus those who wanted to surrender to Franco. Both of these factors caused disunity. There were many changes in the government and ultimately, they failed to convince Britain or France to aid them. The Nationalists were led by and united under General Francisco Franco. Franco was a ruthless leader who killed his enemies to be on top. One of the biggest supporters of the Nationalist side was the Church, which unified the right and aided in increasing the violence. The Church helped to turn the war into a religious crusade and generate international sympathy for Franco's rebel side.¹⁸ All of these internal and external factors contributed to the downfall of the Republic and the Nationalists winning the war in 1939. Franco became dictator of Spain for the next 35 years.¹⁹

¹⁶ Casanova, 215.

¹⁷ Casanova, 227.

¹⁸ Casanova, 211.

¹⁹ Casanova, 339.

The Spanish Republic and Civil War is a well-researched book which this paper uses for context and a lens to examine the turbulent history in Spain during this time. In his book, Casanova draws upon other historians such as Stanley G. Payne, Paul Preston, Gabriel Jackson, and Helen Graham, all of who have also written about this time in Spain. He directly engages in conversation with their arguments by using their arguments to support his or to present an opposing viewpoint. He does not have just one simple argument because, as Pamela Radcliff states, “in each case, Casanova provides multifactoral answers that resist simplistic conclusions.”²⁰ By examining all sides of the conflict, Casanova produces a well-balanced analysis that is not just one-sided.

In his book, Casanova gives a detailed account of the tumultuous time in Spain from 1931-1939, looking first at the Republic and then the Civil War. As Casanova states that his search is for accuracy and truth, the book does not take sides but rather tries to understand the competing forces in Spain from 1931-1939. There is not a simple argument to Casanova’s book. In the *Journal of Contemporary History*, Chris Ealham describes Casanova’s approach as a “detached and neutral perspective.”²¹ Casanova’s two large central questions are “why did the Republic not survive?” and “why did the Republic lose the war?” both of which he answers at the end of each part. He argues that the Republic failed because the military stopped believing in the government and groups on both sides turned to violence.²² He argues that the military won the war because “they had the best-trained troops in the Spanish army, economic power and the

²⁰ Pamela Radcliff, review of *Review of The Spanish Republic and Civil War by Julián Casanova*, by Julián Casanova, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 42, no. 3 (2012): 464–65, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41291254>.

²¹ Chris Ealham, “The Emperor’s New Clothes: ‘Objectivity’ and Revisionism in Spanish History,” ed. Manuel Álvarez Tardío et al., *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 1 (2013): 191–202, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23488342>.

²² Casanova, 9.

Catholic Church on their side, and with them, the winds of international sympathy blew their way.”²³ However, Casanova heavily focuses on only political and military leaders, thus leaving out the experiences of everyday people. His top-down approach misses elements such as the social and cultural history of the time period which would add complexity to give a more complete picture of the tense time in Spain. This would strengthen his argument and add new perspectives to the history of the Spanish Republic and Civil War.

Casanova misses the social history of everyday people and women in his book. A perspective from these two groups can add complexity to his argument, so readers can better grasp the complicated history of Spain from 1931-1939. Even though Casanova mentions the peasant revolts and worker’s strikes, he does not mention any specific names or use sources from these classes. He only dedicates a few pages to women which principally focus on the quick emergence and disappearance of the new women. Overall, Casanova fails to add any discussion on the social history during Spain from 1931-1939 and only touches the surface of the social history. The book would benefit from the added complexity of social history by including everyday individuals and women who lived through these experiences at the time.

Another component that Casanova disregards in his book is cultural history. Cultural history includes the study of a variety of elements such as food, material objects, language, and artwork. Cultural history is significant because it can show the beliefs or ideas of people at a certain time or place in history and often convey subtle or not so subtle messages about society. They show the motivations that drove people in their actions. The book mentions poet and playwright Federico García Lorca twice, only to emphasize the murder and terror used by the Nationalists. While readers should not forget his symbolic death and violence used by the

²³ Casanova, 339.

Nationalists, the book makes no mention of Lorca's works of poetry or plays. There are a few times when Casanova utilizes George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, but Casanova uses it very sparsely and not to its fullest potential. Popular novels and literature with the exception of the press are absent. Lorca's works and other literature such as those by Miguel Hernández could add to Casanova's argument. Cultural history reaches out to a larger audience of people and different audiences than those of the government or military. Therefore, this paper explores these aspects that Casanova overlooks which opens up space for further historical investigation of the cultural history of Spain in the 1930s.

This paper adds a new perspective to the study of the Spanish Civil War by examining *A Play without a Title* by Federico García Lorca. This is one cultural artifact historians can analyze in order to further study the Spanish Republic and Civil War, illustrating the relevance and magnitude of cultural history. Lorca had an accurate vision of Spanish tensions as readers can draw multiple connections between the play and history. Lorca's play demonstrates the kind of tensions, specifically class and ideological tensions, that shaped Spanish society before the Civil War and seems to foreshadow the Civil War.

Lorca lived a short, but dynamic life that impacted his writings. He was born June 5, 1898 in Andalusia into the wealthy land-owning class, although his mother was a schoolteacher. He attended Catholic schools and the University of Granada, first studying music before switching to writing. In 1919 he moved to Madrid where he came to know Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, and Juan Ramón Jiménez. He eventually had a romantic relationship with Salvador Dalí for a time. Lorca spent his life writing a variety of prose, poetry, and plays. He is best known for his Andalusian works such as *Romancero gitano* and his rural trilogy plays, *Bodas de Sangre*, *Yerma*, and *La casa de Bernarda Alba*. Lorca was a member of Generation 1927, a group of

poets who experimented with avant-garde in their works. During the Spanish Republic, he was appointed as theater director with the purpose of touring around rural Spain to spread theater education. During his life, he made notable trips to Buenos Aires, Cuba, and New York City. The Spanish Civil War broke out in July 1936 and in August Nationalist forces arrested Lorca. Historians believe he was targeted due to his homosexuality and leftist views. A few days after being arrested, he was shot in a remote area.²⁴ Lorca's personal life and values directly influenced his works and come through in his artistic creations.

Little is known about the context that *A Play without a Title* was written in since it was not discovered until years after Lorca's death. The play is believed to have been written sometime between 1935 and 1936. Lorca was unable to finish the play due to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. The play was not discovered until much later by his brother and finally published 1976. Unlike his much more well-known plays categorized as "rural tragedies," this play belongs in the category called "impossible theater." Other works part of "impossible theater" include *El Público* and *Así que pasen cinco años*. These works were very different from his previous works. These plays were experimental and include many elements of surrealism.²⁵ Lorca employs these strategies to reveal the class and ideological tensions in Spanish society.

The play is about a play within a play with various characters with general names such as "The Author," "A Prompter," "1st Male Spectator," and so on. The play begins with the Author who addresses the audience about truth and reality. He is interrupted by the 1st Male Spectator, the 1st Female Spectator, a Servant, a Prompter, an Actress, and a Youth, all who argue over reality and the purpose of theater. During the arguing, shots are heard and panic ensues in the

²⁴ "Federico Garcia Lorca | Biography, Poems, Death, & Facts," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed October 2, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Federico-Garcia-Lorca>.

²⁵ Carlos Bauer, "Introduction," *The Public and Play without a Title: Two Posthumous Plays*, by Federico García Lorca, trans. Carlos Bauer (New York: New Directions, 1983), xi-xx.

theater. 2nd Female Spectator, 2nd Male Spectator, 3rd Male Spectator, and a Woodcutter all chime in afraid of the violence heard outside. A Man Dressed in Black enters as the proprietor of the theater, voices are heard offstage, and there is talk of a revolution. The 2nd Male Spectator kills the Worker. A Fairy and Sylph enter in a mystical and dream-like form and take away the Worker. The Author, a Voice, and Actress all speak of fire as the stage illuminates red and the curtain closes. While the plot sounds chaotic, it is purposefully so. The chaos matches that of Spain on the brink of the Civil War. This shows how context and culture influence one another which comes together in the study of cultural history.

In his play, Lorca calls attention to the difference of classes and class conflict. The clearest sign of social conflict in the play is when 2nd Male Spectator, who represents the bourgeoisie and military, kills the Worker. The Worker's line before being killed is "Comrades!"²⁶ Contemporary readers can make a connection to George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* in which Orwell observes that "Comrade" replaced "Señor" as a sign of class equality amongst those in Barcelona fighting on the side of the Republic.²⁷ While this may be the most obvious sign of class conflict represented in the play, the dialogue contains rich messages about the deliberate ignorance of the bourgeoisie.

Lorca's main criticism of the bourgeoisie is their lack of awareness or care of what is going on around them. The Author says to the audience within the play, "All you ever do is search for ways in which not to become aware of anything."²⁸ When the Author tells a grotesque story of a woman dying of hunger, the audience within the play does not respond well. They do

²⁶ Federico García Lorca, *The Public and Play without a Title: Two Posthumous Plays*, trans. Carlos Bauer (New York: New Directions, 1983), 65.

²⁷ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, First Mariner Books edition (Boston: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015), 3.

²⁸ García Lorca, 52.

not believe the Author and say that the story is full of lies. During the outbreak of the Civil War, the bourgeoisie often ignored the horrors going on around them and instead desired to keep safe in their estates and wealthy lifestyle. The Author mocks their lifestyle by saying, “At home you’ve got lies waiting for you, you’ve got your tea, your radio, and a wife who, when she’s not making love to you, thinks about the young soccer player who lives in the little house across the street.”²⁹ When the Author orders that the audience within the play not to interrupt him when he is speaking, the character 1st Male Spectator argues back by saying, “I’ve got a right to. I’ve paid for my seat!”³⁰ Since this man has money, he feels entitled to do as he pleases. Many of the bourgeoisie did not comply or want to comply with the Republican government and during the Civil War, they were dominantly the ones who supported the military rebellion and the Nationalist forces. The Author corrects the 2nd Male Spectator by saying, “Paying for a seat doesn’t imply the right to interrupt the one who’s speaking, even less to pass judgment on the play.”³¹ This can be interpreted as being for class equality in that it does not matter how much money one has, everyone is entitled to give their opinion. Wealth should not equate to the right to overshadow other’s opinions or have a higher value in judgment.

Lorca also mocks the bourgeoisies’ cowardice and the importance of wealth to them. In the play, there is the Actress with whom the Author banter with onstage since the Actress only worries about superficial matters such as her looks and other’s opinions about her. She says that she would love to speak the truth like the Author but says, “I want my emeralds and they’d take them away from me.”³² While there is ambiguity surrounding who exactly “they” refer to,

²⁹ García Lorca, 53.

³⁰ García Lorca, 53.

³¹ García Lorca 53.

³² García Lorca, 59.

nonetheless her wealth is most important to her. Similarly, many of the bourgeoisie knew that a military rebellion against the government was illegal, but their interest was in protecting their wealth which aligned with the Nationalist forces. Defending democracy was not their priority.

Ideological tensions in Spanish society of the 1930s are also brought front and center in Lorca's play as there is talk of revolution. A Voice offstage shouts, "Long live the revolution!"³³ Different ideas about the economy are brought forward. The Prompter says about the economy, "It's a mystery which I believe in and every sensible person respects" to which the Author responds with "To hell with the economy!"³⁴ The Spanish Republic was built on a coalition of parties such as the republicans and socialists. However, each party had their own ideas about the economy. These caused internal conflict during the Republican years and during the Civil War which hindered the Republican's chances of winning.

In addition, the bourgeoisie and the right had their own ideas about the economy which was a large factor in the Spanish Civil War. Places like Granada saw coffee shops and other business collectivized while other parts of Spain controlled by Nationalists forces saw a return to the old economy with large landed-estates worked by peasants. The views of artists are also brought to light as *A Man Dressed in Black* says, "Gunpower kills poetry" to which the Author says, "Or rescues it!"³⁵ This can be interpreted in a variety of ways, but during this period many artists tended to have liberal views and leaned towards the left. When Europe saw the rise of authoritarian governments in the interwar period, many leftists were killed, including left-wing artists. This foreshadows Lorca's own death. With the Author's comment, readers know that when poets or artists die, their work has the power to become more well-known. They become a

³³ García Lorca, 61.

³⁴ García Lorca, 61.

³⁵ García Lorca, 61.

martyr for their cause or artistic genre. In this way, poetry or other art is “rescued” in the sense that it becomes more better known.

Catholicism had strong roots in Spain, therefore religion was a crucial element when looking at competing political ideologies. The Republic sought to reduce the power of the Catholic Church and establish a clear line between the State and Church.³⁶ Lorca points to the importance of religion when the 2nd Male Spectator says, “I belong to the Army of God and I can count on His help...He will love me. My God never forgives. He is God of the armies...God’s with me!” to which a Voice offstage says, “I don’t believe in your God!”³⁷ Anarchists were a prominent party in Spanish politics and would be one of the parties that fought on the side of the Republic. Meanwhile, the Nationalists forces sought to reestablish relations with the Church. The Church helped to gain support for the Nationalist cause since the Church had an extremely large influence in Spain. Therefore, many of those who sided with the Church also sided with the Nationalists. In addition, the Church helped to gain international sympathy for the Nationalist cause as news about the burning of churches and killing of priests by Republican forces spread outside of Spain.³⁸ While in other places the Church and State are separate, in Spain they were often intertwined and combined. The Church became part of the politics and political ideologies.

Lorca also hints at the impact of international ideologies and politics. This is evident when the 2nd Male Spectator is congratulated by the Youth upon killing the Worker and says, “For a teacher, I had a German lieutenant who fought in the African wars. His only objective was to destroy human beings.”³⁹ During this time the play was written, Hitler had just gained power

³⁶ Casanova, 19-35.

³⁷ García Lorca, 65.

³⁸ Casanova, 181-211.

³⁹ García Lorca, 63.

in Germany and his rise to power alarmed many other countries, especially Western democracies. While Fascism had not picked up mass support in Spain during the Spanish Republic, the intervention of Germany and Italy during the Civil War would greatly influence the spread of fascism in Spain.⁴⁰ These two countries not only brought military aid to Franco's forces, but also strengthened their own ideology and helped to increase fascism in Spain which would result in a fascist dictatorship after the Civil War. This was the lasting legacy of the war.

Historians have important choices to make when studying the Spanish Republic and Civil War. There are numerous monographs and primary sources to choose from. *The Spanish Republic and Civil War* by Julián Casanova is just one historical monograph and one interpretation of the topic. *A Play without a Title* by Federico García Lorca is one view of the tumultuous time in Spain. Studying both of these works can help paint a more complete picture of Spain's complicated history. While Casanova presents sophisticated arguments, engages with other historians, and digs deep into the primary sources of political and military elites, he neglects the important perspective of the cultural history during the Republic and Civil War. Too often, historians can make the mistake of only focusing on prominent political and military actors who are well known in history.

Cultural history is critical because it can tell readers about the everyday lives of people, inform readers about the society, and reflect current events or the political climate at a certain place and time in history. Cultural history shows readers the values, beliefs, and ideas people had during this time in Spain which is often not included in the perspectives of elites. Lorca's *A Play without a Title* reveals serious class and ideological tensions that existed in Spanish society during the Spanish Republic and ruptured with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. In

⁴⁰ Casanova, 213-228.

addition, this play demonstrates that political acts and political messages are not always shared or have to happen in political spaces. The Spanish Civil War was total warfare as it affected all aspects of life such as the Church, civilians, and killing of artists like Lorca. Theater has the power to reveal political messages about a specific historical context as Lorca accomplishes in *A Play without a Title*, demonstrating the importance of cultural history. The deep analyzation of both historical monographs, such as *The Spanish Republic and Civil War* by Julián Casanova, and primary sources like *A Play without a Title* by Federico García Lorca, help gain a fuller understanding of the complex history during the Spanish Republic and Civil War.

Bibliography

- Casanova, Julián. *The Spanish Republic and Civil War*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Ealham, Chris. "The Emperor's New Clothes: 'Objectivity' and Revisionism in Spanish History." Edited by Manuel Álvarez Tardío, Roberto Villa García, Fernando del Rey Reguillo, Julián Casanova, Gutmaro Gómez, Jorge Marco, and Julio Aróstegui. *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 1 (2013): 191–202.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23488342>.
- "Federico Garcia Lorca | Biography, Poems, Death, & Facts." Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed October 2, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Federico-Garcia-Lorca>.
- García Lorca, Federico. *The Public and Play without a Title: Two Posthumous Plays*. Translated by Carlos Bauer. New York: New Directions, 1983.
- Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia*. First Mariner Books edition. Boston: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015.
- Radcliff, Pamela. Review of *Review of The Spanish Republic and Civil War by Julián Casanova*, by Julián Casanova. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 42, no. 3 (2012): 464–65.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41291254>.