

A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

TO THE EDITOR OF *Las Americas*: A REPLY TO ANGEL PALERM

Dear Sir

I have read the letter by Angel Palerm, published in your issue of October last, about my book, *The Spanish Civil War*. I would like to answer the main points he makes:

Page 212, para. 2: Mr Palerm says, 'In a subtitle (the second serious error on the title page) it is called an objective history.' From reading on carefully, it seems that by 'the first serious error' he means the title, 'The Spanish Civil War.' Is it not hair-splitting to object to my use as a title of the phrase which, however inadequate, is usually employed by most people to describe the event in question? My title is not perfect. What title ever is? In its French edition, my book appeared as '*La Guerre d'Espagne*.' I think this less good. Furthermore, there is no subtitle. Nor do I use the word 'objective' in describing myself. I admit, however, that 'objectivity' was my aim, in the sense that I wished to approach the many puzzles and controversial questions of the Spanish Civil War on their merits.

Page 212, line 23: Mr Palerm says the history of the civil war 'could never (my italics) be written by one who describes himself as an "impartial" observer.' The quotation marks used suggest he is making a direct quotation. Actually, I said I tried to be 'dispassionate,' not impartial. A small point, but if you dislike a book as much as Mr Palerm apparently dislikes mine, you ought to take the trouble to check even minor attributions. Or is this simply Anglo-Saxon pedantry? On the substantive point, I continue to think it necessary in writing history to look at the different existing accounts of events with a receptive, rather than a closed, mind. One should be prepared to revise one's opinions. My aim in writing history is to render the past less obscure and therefore less fearful.

Mr Palerm does not, however, apparently think I am without prejudices but that I simply have the wrong ones. For he next says (*page 212, last line but one*): 'A certain cold contempt, derived from inherited prejudices, becomes evident from the very first pages,' and (*page 213, line 18*): 'I suspect that Thomas attempts covertly to bury the war with a feeling of heavy guilt. The countries that consented to and applauded the Munich settlement cannot have a clear conscience.' These remarks are hard to take seriously. Some Spaniards have thought Britain their traditional enemy. Others have seen France in the role of bogey man. Mr Palerm seems content to repeat the old slander of 'Perfide Albion,' as pernicious as that of *la leyenda negra* which I am now accused of propagating. In truth Spain has been interpreted at least as sympathetically by English historians or scholars as by others of French, Italian or other nationality. These sentences of Mr Palerm also

suggest my book supports in one way or another the Munich settlement. This is untrue; everybody else who has read it, and has taken the trouble to speak to me about it, has thought I was critical, perhaps too critical of British foreign policy in the 'thirties. On page 615, for example, I describe it as having been characterized by a 'certain craven indolence.' I describe the Munich meeting (pages 554-5) with (as I now think) perhaps a little too much 'cold contempt.' A case can be made for Munich. But I have not made it. Criticism of British policy can be found on nearly every page of the book.

Mr Palerm's next accusation, that I 'reduce the tragedy of Spain to a purely Spanish drama, in which the democratic world was emotionally but erroneously involved,' is, again, not true. The great powers played a lamentable but decisive role. The whole question of foreign aid is explored in my book at length. My analysis of the *timing* of foreign aid, as well as of its quantity, together with an enquiry into the motives of the great powers for doing what they did, seems to me a valuable part of the book.

Mr Palerm next embarks on a long digression, acknowledged by him as such, on the Spanish character, none of which conflicts with what I said, and none of which appears to me new or arresting. It is true, however, that I did not devote much space to the difference between Spain and the rest of Europe insofar as feudalism is concerned; but I judged this less important than he to a study of the war between 1936 and 1939.

When he returns to his main theme, he allows his anti-British prejudice (or must I use the word 'passion' where he is concerned, reserving the use of 'prejudice' for myself?) to run away with him. He speaks of the 'irresistible British temptation towards the picturesque' (page 217, para. 2). Surely anyone who had troubled to read even a few historical works in English and in Spanish might think that the picturesque is more often found in the latter than the former? This suggestion contains dangerous hints of 'inherited prejudice,' I realise. As to Mr Palerm's remarks about the role of individual leaders in the war, the temperament of persons such as Largo Caballefo, Prieto, Negrín, Franco, Azaña, Queipo de Llano, José Antonio Primo de Rivera, etc, did have an effect upon the people around them and upon events. To deny this is to deny responsibility to human beings in history, or even in life itself, and to assume that events derive from lifeless or irresistible forces. Leaders, however unsatisfactory, have an effect on the led. Even a failure to decide is a decision of a kind. Of course the reason why the temperament of such and such a person takes such and such a shape is a consequence of their own past experiences and the influences to which they have been subject. But, in a given situation, qualities in particular men evidently count. To say that the heroes of the Spanish Civil War were not Negrín, Prieto or any other leader but the 'Anarchists' in the mass, the 'volunteers,' or other small sections or big sections in the Republican Army is a misuse of

the word 'hero.' A hero must be a single man. To speak of masses as heroes means that there were no heroes. In fact, of course, when given good leaders (and often without them) the 'masses' did fight heroically, as everyone understands that term. But when the masses were in complete control, without leadership, or direction of any kind, the tragic 'atrocities' were the result—as I think they might be in any society (certainly in English society) if all legal restraints seemed to have vanished.

Mr Palerm next criticises my treatment of 'atrocities.' I agree with him that this is an important and complicated problem very hard to treat fairly but impossible to omit. It seemed to me that the best approach was to give some idea of the numbers involved, to suggest the character of what happened and so far as possible avoid moral condemnation. These chapters were quite short and in general I say that the horrors were rather less extensive than had been said at the time and in any publication since. There may be a better way of treating such a question, but Mr Palerm does not suggest one beyond saying that he anticipates 'for our crimes as Spaniards in a war of historical and universal significance we shall each have to answer to a tribunal higher than those Franco or the Republic established . . .' I assume that here Mr Palerm is alluding to God. In that case it is hardly very risky for Mr Palerm to add that the findings of this 'tribunal' will be both juster and more severe than mine.

In his next paragraphs, Mr Palerm scolds me (page 218, para. 2) for over-estimating the role of the International Brigades and of Negrín. But the figures he quotes of the Brigades in relation to the Republican Army are much the same as those I give, though a little more extreme. Further, in the battle of the Jarama (my description of which Mr Palerm criticises) the International Brigades did take the leading role in resisting the Nationalist offensive. The weight I give throughout to the international side of the events in Spain is surely justified by the fact that on both sides the actual war material used, from aircraft to rifles, was brought from abroad. In the air, of course, the war material was entirely of foreign origin. As for Negrín, I am aware that my picture of him is controversial but I still consider it correct. Mr Palerm produces no evidence disproving what I say.

Mr Palerm ends with some high-flown, almost 'picturesque' writing. The true history of the civil war, he says, will be 'written by an old warrior, tired and disillusioned, such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo or Miguel de Cervantes. And when that history is written, it will not only be a great history but it will be history itself.' This reads quite well, but I wonder if it means anything. What is the difference between 'a great history' and 'history itself'? Many tired and disillusioned warriors have already written books about the civil war and many of these are very valuable personal accounts; but almost without exception these writers have been unwilling, or perhaps too tired, to read the accounts written by other old warriors and see where their memory is at fault or has missed something. Historical

research, after all, is hard work, possibly too much so for the disillusioned. And is it serious, after all, to suggest that Cervantes could write good *history*? Have we learned nothing of historical method or of the real springs of human behaviour and society since the sixteenth century that we have to look on Díaz del Castillo as a model? How fair really was that chronicler to Montezuma or to Cortés? The value of Díaz del Castillo lies surely in the freshness of his observations, which is a method quite adequate to describe what is after all, essentially a simple if magnificent story of conquest. But a Díaz del Castillo of the Civil War would have had to have been in many places at the same time if he were to employ his method successfully—even in London, that glum centre of the picturesque, of prejudice, of ‘objectivity,’ and also, the seat of the justly insulted Non-Intervention Committee. In short, *whoever* writes about the Civil War would have to write *chiefly* about events he had not seen; if he were a captain in the Republican Army, he would have to devote a good deal of attention to events which occurred in the German Foreign Office, in Burgos, in Madrid (if he were in Barcelona) or in Barcelona (if he were in Madrid), in Paris, etc, etc. After all, does personal experience of the front qualify anyone necessarily to write more effectively about the importance of these other things and places? Important, for whom? Is it not usual for an actor in a certain series of historical events to exaggerate his own role or the importance of things he has seen? As a historian, I protest against the arrogance of the participant (I don’t here mean Mr Palerm personally) who thinks that because at a certain time or place he chanced to lie behind or in front of the sights of a rifle he necessarily is the best analyst of the reasons why he got into that heroic but ultimately degrading position.

HUGH THOMAS

20 Aubrey Walk
London W8, England