ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The Ongoing Legacy of the Spanish Civil War for One Family

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Introduction

This paper examines the health consequences of the Spanish Civil War for a family of Republican militiamen who defended the socialist project in a divided Spain between 1936 and 1939. The consequences of the Civil War are traced in their children and grandchildren. Interviews with members of a family of socialist political exiles revealed how the war against Spanish fascism affected their lives and their bodies. As children, the adults had been forced to flee Spain for their very lives, accompanying their parents first to France and later to America. Once the war was over, those who remained in Spain were enveloped in a wave of terror which forced them to hide and then escape across the border. As socialist families in resistance, they were under constant threat of death. Based on the testimony of various generations, this paper traces the messages transmitted from grandparents to parents, from parents to children, and from grandparents to grandchildren, focusing on how those messages affected their mental health. This evidence supports my hypothesis that, in the context of war, it is not necessary to have been on the front lines to suffer the trauma caused by the material conditions of terror and persecution. Nor was it necessary to have personally suffered the experiences of exile and the persecution in 1939 to carry the burden of what the Civil War meant in terms of the loss and failure of a utopian political project. The violence was like a tattoo engraved on all generations of the family, even - and

perhaps especially - on those born in the country of refuge.

The generations born in Mexico did not feel that Spain was that remote, inaccessible country of their parents, nor was it the lost paradise where their grandparents would have chosen to live and die. Spain, along with the whole history of war and exile, had moved to the country of exile. It was present within the four walls of their homes, waiting every day of the lives of the exiled generation and their descendents. Spain was not just a specific geography; it was an accumulation of meanings, practices, sensitivities, customs, and value systems which exiled members took with them wherever they went. By reproducing the pain of the past, by making explicit what had had happened in the past, emotionally charged messages within the family system marked the health of all members and governed their systems of perception, thought, appreciation and action.[1]

Methodology

This study was undertaken using the methods and tools of grounded theory. I conducted in-depth interviews with eight members of the same family and used narrative techniques for their analysis focusing on the past and present meanings of exile for each person interviewed. Since the family had been scattered by the war, several members had fled to the Dominican Republic, others were exiled in Venezuela or Mexico. In my analysis I focused on the significant themes related to political persecution and exile for each protagonist in the receiving countries. These interviews among surviving members of the family were used to extract significant themes.

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[1] Their "habitus", according to conceptualization of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

Dispersion of the Family: A Corollary of Exile

One of the most decisive and obvious consequences of the war was that families and their communities did not remain together, but rather were dispersed both during and after the war. Any chance of reviving a new social project following defeat of the previous one was severely limited. The Republicans had lost their primary social network of family, friends and fellow partisans. The challenge was therefore not just to rebuild their personal and family lives in the country of refuge. They also had to "recover" lost members of their network who were still trapped in other countries.

> *My brother had to stay behind. He was a soldier, so he had to stay in Barcelona. He was in the army but he was not old enough to go to the front. He remained in the rearguard, guarding against the bombing, at 17 years of age!*

Stories of family separation and disruption abound. Some of these have a happy ending. Other families more or less repaired the rupture caused by war. Others simply could not tell their story; in their attempts to meet up with their unit and escape to safety, they were captured by the fascists.

> *Uncle Valentín's brothers had sailed away and he stayed behind because he didn't want to leave his wife and daughters on their own. But his wife decided to leave him because she felt unsafe with him being a "red" and feared they would all get caught. She wanted to separate from my uncle so as not to end up a refugee or among the persecuted. ... Once he was on his own, my uncle tried to reach his brothers in Casablanca so they could all travel to Mexico, but he was captured in Algiers. He was caught and forced to work on the trans-Saharan railway. That's where he died. We never saw him again.*

The war was like a massive bowling ball, knocking down and scattering family members in all directions. This huge ball hit right in the middle of the group, toppling the structure which kept them united and functional.

> *My Dad never saw my older sister again. And by the time I saw her again, my Dad was dead.*

The war's power to destroy families was completely unforeseen. The Republicans had no means to prevent the bowling balls from knocking down their social structures. The disorganization of social networks in the midst of a disaster made it difficult to process losses, regain hope and rebuild a new project with the same energy and ability as before.

> *Our eldest brother was in France with everyone else but couldn't come to Mexico because he was too old and they wouldn't give him any papers. He had to return to Spain and sign up with the fascists. When he became 18, he was old enough to be exiled, so from France we lost touch with him, we couldn't get documents and it was many years before we had any contact with him again. When my father died it was one of his greatest sorrows, not knowing what had become of his son.*

Many parents died without knowing the fate of the children. Many children grew up and lived without knowing where their parents or siblings were. Political repression put a death sentence on every exile, an impediment to rebuild and start over after the devastating war.

> *My father-in-law's father was shot, as you know. That's why he went to military school in Valencia, where he was trained to go to war. He graduated as a lieutenant, went to the front and was injured – that's why he had a twisted finger, from the shrapnel from a grenade. ... Once in exile he became a hypochondriac, terrified by illness and the possible imminence of death* (21009).

Illness and Diagnoses: The Marks of War

Family members who were left with a sense of defeat or without belief in a political project were much more vulnerable to all sorts of health problems and illnesses. Those who lost what made

them fight for a better future also lost the driving force of their life.

When the fascist uprising began, the Republicans came together to defend themselves. The "El Socialista" newspaper, for instance, provided several soldiers – a group of journalists trained to go to the front. The whole family was socialist. We were scared when they announced that Bilbao would fall, we really felt like running away then, but fear? It wasn't like that before... it was anger about the uprising.

Anger triggered bursts of energy and the strength to go to the front, to enlist, and to form a squadron. Fury about the uprising was the how this family – as so many others – developed the ability to resist when faced with injustice. It was this anger that kept them alive. When they lost the utopian project they lost their strength and their health. Anger became a problem when they had to give up the hope of liberation which had given them strength. All that rage which had made them fight now turned against them. Anger turned into helplessness and defeat, and in its place arose fear, anxiety about death, and illness.

Many suffered mental disorders. The mother of a close friend of mine went crazy. As a young girl I stayed with her and was evacuated with her. The French said women and children had to leave the capital because the Germans were coming. So I left with my brother and sister – Juanita and Ramón – as well as María de los Ángeles and her mother. We returned to Paris only to be evacuated and she went crazy when she got to Mexico.[2]

Illnesses rooted in fear, persecution, death threats, and forced migration befell the generation directly involved in the Civil War and affected the daily lives of each subsequent generation.

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[2] "The aim of political violence is to destroy the individual, their personal relationships, their group identity and their membership in a community." (Castillo, 1998)

We were caught up in the German invasion and everything went haywire. We left in cars, but they blocked the roads so we had to abandon the cars we'd hired. In the resulting confusion we became separated. My parents and my sister were in one group. I was in another with my little sister and a family friend. Walking along the roads we managed to get onto a train bound for Bordeaux. Shortly after, the German air force came and started bombing. The train stopped and we got out. Luckily there were some woods nearby; we ran to take cover among the trees while the Germans machine-gunned the train, wrecking it.

My little sister had a nervous breakdown. She had always had weak eyes. She had a breakdown because, as we lay among the trees, the machine-gunning was so close that it was pure luck that none of us were hit. But the little thing went into a shock and went blind. She couldn't see! She was blind for several hours.

This shock remained with her forever. Many members of the family were left symbolically blinded at some time in their lives. The need to stop seeing the destruction of their town, their community, their country, their homes; the frustration and helplessness; and the overwhelming reality left more than one in a state of shock. "Not seeing" was a necessary reaction to avoid a greater harm.

My nephew's death was really no surprise. He'd been trying to kill himself from the age of 15. He had some huge issues which must have tormented him. I don't know why, because it's not that he said anything to me. It was just obvious that he was not well, not enjoying life. He was a tormented kid, very intelligent but deeply tormented. He had a great sense of humor but he wasn't happy with life and never managed to get over it. He killed himself. He'd been treated several times but would continue to try.

Implicit messages are felt by the more sensitive members of subsequent generations. They appropriate these messages at different levels without even being aware of doing so. Cultural groups contain myths and foundation stories which function like institutions for the families which belong to them. The messages transmitted from generation to generation are a collective product which gives meaning both to the group's broader history and to the smaller stories of everyday life. These messages are important enough that succeeding generations receive them through non-verbal acts, through the emotional ambience of the family system, through affective bonds, and through those unspoken secrets which are nonetheless acted out and passed on.

Why go to Spain? I have Spain at home.

The different ways used by family members to compensate for this past were as diverse as they were. The pathways taken by their inner world, pathways both for defense and for rehabilitation, responded constantly to the larger historical context and to the particular needs of each subject's individual situation.

At home the atmosphere was always depressed, austere, dimly-lit, almost unbreathable, enclosed and saturated with books. My parents, as I do now, clung to eroticism in order not to perish in the deep sadness of exile.

Suicide was not uncommon among the children and grandchildren of the exiles. Their families had already been exiled in a foreign country, an act which occurred through no fault of their own. They lived in the midst of a painful chaos imposed by decisions forced upon them by the war. Faced with the possibility of perishing passively in the deepest sadness of exile, they actively chose exile in death.

Suicide was painful for survivors. It represented yet one more failed project. For the subjects of this study suicide represented in physical terms – much as the Republic had in symbolic terms – yet another untimely loss. For the larger group suicide meant a rejection of the future, just like the "failed" utopian project. The family had to again revisit their plans,

expectations and ideas. One again they were powerless in a tragic event from which there was no return.

Self-exile in death became the clearest metaphor for how what had been implicit in the symbolic world could be acted out in the material world. The implicit messages spoke of the pain of war, of an experience silenced, of taboos. These messages were transmitted, breathed, inherited, incorporated in different ways and at different levels by family members who were born and grew up in the country of exile and knew little of the history of their parents and grandparents.

But you were saying that although you didn't talk to them about war and all that, the ideology was obvious. You didn't have to talk about it because it was obvious. In your home as in mine, the question of the religious idea or of non-religion and how politics was viewed never needed explaining because the way we all thought was obvious.

Just as the ideology was clear and there was no need to explain it, so too the sense of perpetual grief for the lost socialist republic. In the informal socialization of each family there were hidden, non-explicit lessons. Although not part of the formal script, they were transmitted through practices. In many cases these "hidden" messages were, and still are, stronger and more loaded than any explicit teachings. The process by which they are transmitted is unconscious and neither those who teach them nor those who receive the lessons seem aware of what is happening.

The decision to die ended up by replacing the group's victimization by the war with the victimization of one individual. Suicide would represent, repair, and relieve the grief of the entire collectivity, whose pain was structural and thus non-verbal and silenced. In each family there always include some who appropriate the tragic contents of the entire group and take them to their logical conclusion.

I always blame myself for that. I blame myself for never having talked to my children about war, I never told them. ... I do blame myself for that, for not knowing how to instill in them… I don't think I've

told them much. I don't know about my husband, I don't know to what extent he talked about it. It's because it's hard to remember painful things. For instance, I've hardly talked to my children about it and my husband was always very busy and didn't say much to them, that's what I think.

The difficulty of coming to terms with the past can be explained in part by the lack of appropriate social and political mechanisms which might allow it to happen. The silence found in family life finds its analogue in the repressive social mechanisms of the post-war period. The private life of the exiles mirrored the political life of Spain where there existed a compulsory and artificial silencing of the cruel past and of the implications of the war and Franco's dictatorship. The régime of terror managed to rewrite history and alter the past in such a way that later generations, on both the left and right, learned only tidbits of veiled history with respect to what happened in their own homes between 1936 and 1939. Navarro (2002) has published reflections on how the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Spain was built on the silencing and clouding of the shameful past. The dictatorship managed to impose a collective amnesia about one of the cruelest events of the 20th century. The heirs of that history had little to guide them as they tried to look at and understand their present reality. The whole country, including the families of the victims, also had limited possibilities not only for compensation for the total lack of justice but even of any establishment of responsibilities or recognition of history as experienced by them. This situation was true even under democratic governments, including the socialists. There has not been in Spain – not even now with the law of historical memory – any ritual, tribute, or symbol recognizing the liberation struggle of Republican families: socialists, anarchists, communists and/or individuals or groups who fought on their own for the ideals of liberation.

In the family studied, as in many others, suicide and illnesses are evidence of how what had been silenced caused certain family spokespersons to express in real terms what could not be represented in symbolic life. Healing wounds as painful as those caused by war is difficult, even when it is part of the political agenda of a society's history.

Compensation

Millions of Spaniards were left orphaned by a country that had been despoiled and violated. In the absence of appropriate social, public, and political means to compensate for this damage, individuals sought private means to set right – on a personal level – that which, publicly, remained unpunished.

When political and social mechanisms are created to judge and do justice in communities and nations following acts of extreme mass violence, the chances for compensating the victims are much higher (Monroy, 1999) than when violence and injustice are politically legitimized by the State and the international judicial gaze, as was the case of Spain. (Sluzki, 2007)

When political venues to process collective events do not exist, there is a risk that compensation is restricted to the personal level and becomes the individual responsibility of each of the victims. "*Grief and sadness within the four walls of a family home are different from the same sadness channeled in a public event where the pain takes on a political meaning.*" (Monroy, 1999)

In one of his most important books, Sluzki (1996) states "*our culture provides only nominal recognition of the fact that migration is a transition which generates extreme tensions.*" When immigrants begin to show clear signs of this tension, the "pathology" tends to be seen out of context and is treated as a "chemical imbalance." The context within which the problems arose and develop is lost as is a political understanding of the symptoms.

Here too, psychiatric institutions reproduce in part the very relations of dominance from which the refugee family had been fleeing. "Mental health" services converted the classic suffering of war and forced exile into various clinical diagnoses.

I must have been not quite all there, I must have already been a bit nuts. Maybe it was due to all those things I'd done that later I couldn't connect the dots.

Psychiatric treatment meant putting subjects on medication to make them "symptom-free." Making the most obvious symptoms disappear did not provide any space for the subjects to process, as a group, their experiences of war and loss, nor the potential link between defeat and their symptoms. Missing was a symbolic space to discuss the political and structural foundations upon which their pain arose. Medicalization as the sole and/or isolated treatment modality reinforced the idea that their symptoms were rooted in a disease instead of understanding and treating them in their symbolic and social dimension. (Foucault, 1967) *"It is when the doctor-patient dyad appears that the patient must give himself up completely to the physician in order to be cured. Emerging from their [personal] "alienation" means alienating themselves in the physician."* (Canal, 2002)

In the eyes of their partners or children, some family members remained seriously weakened after the psychiatric institution applied treatments to their bodies. It was unclear whether the weakness and insecurity of those thus "treated" resulted their illness, from the treatment itself in psychiatric hospitals, or from the war.

> *He was there for a year and he was declared disabled for social security purposes. After a year, if you don't go and work somewhere else, you can apply for disability and little by little he became very weak. He would do this and that but found it very hard; they give them medication which leaves them like zombies.*

It was the wives, sons, and daughters who talked about how their mothers and fathers had done after losing the war. What I wanted to understand in this process was not the diagnoses themselves, but rather how partners, children, and other relatives understood those who were directly expelled from their country.

For family members, medical diagnoses changed expectations regarding those the institutions had defined as "ill." Physicians presented the idea of "weakness" and in some cases the diagnosis became a self-fulfilling prophecy. In one specific case the diagnosis of being "disabled" seemed completely at odds with the possibilities and commitments of an individual who had been developing his skills in political analysis and who was committed to working.

Final considerations

Within the family studied, the personal work of rebuilding a new sense of identity was made much more complicated because it was not defined politically, that is to say, the problems were not seen as those typical of groups made vulnerable by war and repression. Added to this was the fact that Spain never recognized all those who had fought and made a commitment to a future of liberation. This did not happen after Franco's death. Nor did it occur during the period of "democratic transition" and not even during the current socialist government. The children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of these exiled fighters found the process of creating an identity to be problematic inasmuch as their shared past had been distorted by the official version of history.

The existence of groups marked by the war had been politically ignored and no restitution has been undertaken publicly and politically. This has left thousands of refugees isolated and forced to accept that they had a private illness. They did not see themselves as part of a group seriously damaged by a dictatorship of terror. *The experience of victims of human rights violations during dictatorships shows the need to see beyond the clinical sphere, since the harmful content is in a social and institutional sphere.* (Retamal, 2002)

How a problem is interpreted determines how its solution is sought. We can only wish that within this story there had been a "professional approach" capable of de-individualizing symptoms and understanding them as a product of the violent context of a country at war. Since the damage occurred at a historic time of persecution and social upset, the restitution should also be social, political, and public, with recognition that symptoms and diagnoses resulted from the strategy of fascist terror and were not the personal defect of certain vulnerable individuals. The problems of illness in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39 responded to specific social and political mechanisms which engraved their meaning on the bodies of the subjects, though not through individual or neurological "lesions."

Sadly, there were no interventions of this type. Not by health professionals, not by justice

professionals, not in public policies. No one understood the problems of illness in these groups in their symbolic dimension and even less so in their political dimensions. Social physicians and critical health professionals have much to contribute in this regard.

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