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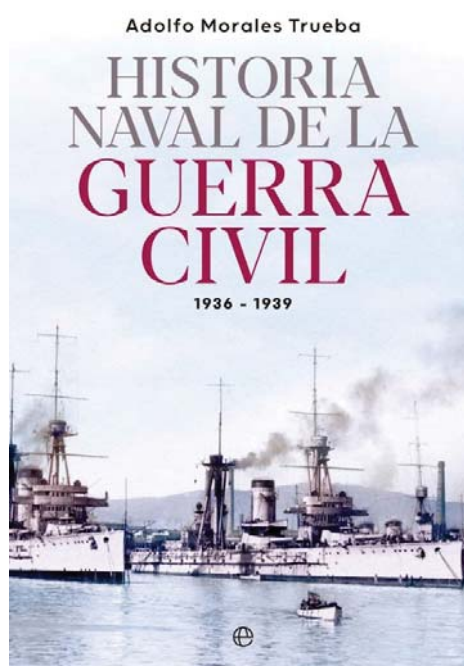
## ***RECENSION***

***HISTORIA NAVAL DE LA GUERRA CIVIL, 1936-1939***

*Adolfo Morales Trueba*

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Freud wrote in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that major conflicts do not occur between major differences, but between minor differences, so that the smaller the difference between the parties, paradoxically, the greater the violence that is unleashed. The key is that there is recognition, differentiation, but not otherness.

That is why the biggest conflicts are civil wars, where violence is extreme. And to recall Carl Schmitt, once initiated, it transcends its causes, generates its own dynamics and can only be understood from a specifically political logic.

Despite the economic importance of its coast —transport, tourism, fishing, etc.— and the fact that it is a peninsula —literally “almost an island”—, Spain ignores the conditioning factors determined by geography and does not pay adequate attention to its maritime dimension, even though this was decisive for its successful civilising project in the past. The sea is neither visible nor of interest beyond where it covers. And this despite having a large fishing fleet.

The strategic model of 18th century Spain was that of an army which, added to the English army, was superior to the French army; and that of a navy which, added to the French navy, was superior to the English navy. But the defeats of Trafalgar first, and the *Disaster of '98*, later, caused the country's naval vocation to decline, although plans by Ferrándiz and Miranda gave it back some of its lustre in the 20th century.

History is always a teacher and is intimately related to strategy. It is better to learn from the experience of the past and its mistakes than to reproduce them from an Adamistic perspective. To paraphrase Mark Twain, history does not repeat itself, but it rhymes. Contradictorily again, only defeat and failure teach; it is therefore worth studying them. Human, all too human.

For most of the 20th century, Naval History has been a field given over to Anglo-Saxon historiography which, since the great work of the Naval Captain (also a laureate; arms and letters) Cesáreo Fernández Duro, *La Armada española desde la unión de los reinos de Castilla y Aragón* (8 volumes, 1894-1903 and still highly recommendable reading), has practically written it from its milestones, silences and references; and has even uncritically praised the instrumentation of History by Rear Admiral Alfred T. Mahan in his famous work *La Influencia del Poder Naval en la Historia (1660-1783)*.

In this work, published in 1890 and cited by many, as is often the case with the great classics —in other words, without having read it— the History of Spain is used as a counterpoint to that of the United Kingdom with a view to demonstrating the superiority of Naval Power and its possibilities, giving doctrinal substance and coherence to the strategic moves made then by the United States and in the process defaming its strategic rival at the time.

On the other hand, the Civil War has always been of considerable interest and has given rise to extensive literature that has dealt with many of its most important aspects. And it could not be understood in any other way, given the tear that the conflict brought with it. The counterpoint is that this historiography is often based

on ideological positions or seeks to serve a cause when it does not judge the past from current keys.

However, the development of naval operations and their strategic implications are an exception to this. It has been approached by presenting the naval domain as a secondary theatre of operations in a primarily land-based war when this was either not the case or not fully.

The Civil War at sea is an exciting episode that deserves to be told and known. The history of the Navy between 1936 and 1939 involved actions by its surface ships at sea, by its Marine units on the land fronts, by its aircraft in the seas and skies of the peninsula and by its submarines underwater. Many sailors on both sides lost their lives, and large naval units have been lying in the deep ever since.

Land was certainly the decisive theatre but the naval sphere, although uncoordinated with land, played an important role in a conflict. It is a fact that both sides depended on contributions from third countries received by this means. Also because of the not insignificant detail that the bulk of the rebel army was in Africa, which is to say, on the other side of the sea. And the role of the Moroccan forces was not small.

In any case, from an academic perspective, the naval issues of the Civil War have still been insufficiently addressed and it was necessary to fill this historiographical gap.

Thus, more than 25 years have passed since the last major work on this facet of the Spanish conflict, *La guerra silenciosa y silenciada (The Silent and Silenced War)*, published in 1998 by brothers Fernando and Salvador Moreno de Alborán y Reyna. Moreover, it has probably been almost 40 years since it was presented with an extension suitable for the general public.

In recent years, access has been gained to previously unknown documentation to update the analysis of the Civil War at sea with new discoveries and contributions, thus bringing to light previously unknown data.

The problem is that some facts and attitudes are far from being forgotten; indeed, they continue to arouse passions in the naval community to such an extent that it is difficult to deal with them objectively. It could be no other way as such a civil conflict, transferred to a relatively small organisation, generated such waves of pain that they still reach us today. For a long time, this advised oblivion as a kind of therapy for overcoming. The war de facto reconfigured the ranks that remain in place to this day.

In July 1936, the *General Corps Officers' Rank* had 721 officers. Of these, 255 were executed or killed in the first months of the war. And 357 were separated from service for being, or being presumed to be, in a situation of rebellion. This means that 84.8% of the officers had risen up against the Republic. As a result, only 47 General Corps Officers (including 3 midshipmen) fought for the Republic: 6% of the total rank.

Transferring a social conflict—in this case, between officers and subordinate classes—to the confined space of a ship accentuated a polarisation that gave the ship an explosive nature. Unlike the Army, the Navy—with the counterexample of

Vice-Admiral Topete and *La Gloriosa*— had remained practically, until the Civil War, oblivious to the interventionist vicissitudes of 19th-century political life, declaring itself to be a corps with an important technical or professional background that was not at all interested in politics.

But such a thing is neither new nor solely a product of this country's culture and idiosyncrasies. There was the famous mutiny on the battleship *Potemkin* in 1905; the rebellion at the Helsingfors base and the naval schools in Kronstadt or the Baltic Fleet in 1917; of the German fleet in Kiel in 1918; on the *Jan Bart* and the *France* in 1919 to oppose intervention against the Soviets; or, in the case of the British navy, the naval mutiny at Invergordon in 1931.

Finally, the book in question is written by a Marine Infantry Officer, Colonel Adolfo Morales Trueba, who is also a member of the academic community in his capacity as a doctor in International Security, a degree obtained with a doctoral thesis on the naval policy of the Second Republic.

The Colonel has brought together in the subject of this review a matter of a historical nature with his military and naval training, which has resulted in a rich product, based on an approach with the breadth of vision that should characterise special operations officers.

In turn, the work is the translation of his research experience to the field of dissemination, giving accessibility for the general public to the soundness of its basis. The result is an enjoyable and pleasant product to read, which improves our understanding of something that is beginning to be more distant in time and therefore can be more objectively analysed.

His work aims to be dispassionate; he shies away from emotionality as he does from politics. In doing so, he seeks a balance and weighting that does not offend the reader, whatever their political persuasion. To this end, on the one hand, he endows his discourse with an expository dimension, full of facts and names, because war is made by people. On the other hand, he avoids unnecessary judgements and unprofessional qualifications; and without ignoring them, he does not over-expose either the massacres or the subsequent repression in order to focus on the strategic consequences of the operations. The cost, of course, is to deprive the decision process of the psychological framework, but I would not have been able to reproduce it either.

The sea, as always, almost invisible to the citizens of this country, was relevant to the war. Its continuation would not have been possible for the Republic without Soviet supplies, which, it must be acknowledged, were never interrupted and experienced only relatively minor and, in global terms, irrelevant mishaps. Nor was it any less so for the rebels, who received convoys and material support from Italy and Germany. However, as the author argues, the Republic, with more means, could have done more but lacked competent commanders.

The relevance of controlling the sea is particularly evident in the consequences of the lack of this control. Such is the case, as Colonel Morales details, of the serious

strategic error committed by the Republic, which, faced with the difficulties of the government forces in the northern theatre of operations, mistakenly shifted the main fleet resources towards the Bay of Biscay.

The strategic surprise of the entry into service —although not with all its operational means— of the cruiser *Canarias* which, together with the *Almirante Cervera*, was dispatched to the Strait in September 1936, gave the rebel side superiority in the area. This materialised on 27 September in the sinking of the destroyer *Almirante Ferrándiz*.

Thus, between 18 July and 31 October, 13,962 members of the Spanish Army were transferred from Africa to the peninsular theatre by air, the same forces that rose up with the exploitation of tactical control of the Strait of Gibraltar and, as the author emphasises, in barely ten days, 12,000 men crossed along with the necessary war material.

But it is also worth noting that the Republic maintained control of this area until October, which prevented the Army of Africa from crossing en masse as soon as the uprising began, thus giving the government time to organise the defence of Madrid, where during the first weeks of the war only light columns arrived with limited troops, preventing a rapid victory, as was intended.

However, as Colonel Morales demonstrates through multiple examples, both sides conducted the operations with a strongly land-based approach, so that the naval side was not well integrated into the overall planning of these operations. Naval strategy was relevant, and could have been even more so if both sides had realised its importance, had integrated it and given it the necessary attention, something neither side managed to do.

As the author points out, the conduct of the naval war was conditioned more by the mistakes of both sides than by their successes. The rebels committed serious tactical errors, which led to no lesser results: the sinking of the battleship *España*, the cruiser *Baleares* and the transport *Castillo de Olibe* (2,112 deaths with no military need). But the Republicans fell into major strategic or operational errors, such as giving up the Strait of Gibraltar or not making a greater effort to occupy Mallorca and thus control the Western Mediterranean.

Despite having most of the fleet's units at its disposal, the Republic did not exploit the superiority of the material available. Professional competence and fidelity belong to different fields. One is not a substitute for the other, however much both are needed.

Moreover, among the many lessons that can be drawn from this work is that war is a political activity but on a military level. For this reason, it requires technical training at all levels, from tactical to strategic, which cannot be ignored, and with organisational spaces in which political intervention must be preventive rather than systematic because of the mismatch created for the lower levels of decision-making and the reactions it requires.

Day-to-day politics should not be transferred to the sphere of the armed forces, subjecting them to its ups and downs and tensions. Armed forces are there to fulfil their intended purposes, not to play politics. According to the author, control of the republican organisation by means of committees was another obstacle for its navy to function efficiently, an extremely difficult task when you are constantly questioning the orders you receive.

Also relevant is the control and centralisation of communications, decisive for the failure of the uprising in the Navy. And I must say that I am proud that my grandfather, Federico Aznar Bárcena —mentioned several times in the book and at other times in his career— was personal assistant to Admiral Miranda, one of those responsible in the 1920s for implementing an effective, telecommunications-based command and control system.

In short, the main value of this book is to present a historiographical study developed with scientific solvency, accessible to the general public and related to a relatively unexplored area. To achieve this it sought a technical and impartial approach, which overcomes the ideological and even fideistic charge often incorporated by traditional references.

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