

A visit to Mallorca

I live in France now and have done since 1996 when I retired from teaching journalism at City University in London. From my small town on the western edge of the Dordogne it's a day's drive to Barcelona and the car ferry to Palma, Mallorca.

With my wife Amanda, I made this journey in March 2017 to see if we could find the place where her Communist journalist father, Richard Kisch (1912-1998), had been wounded in August 1936 fighting for the Spanish Republic against the Nationalists. When I knew him my father-in-law was a colourful, impatient character who was an unlikely Communist: he didn't do "theory"; he didn't easily follow "rules"; he was very inclined to make things up as he went along. Amanda sometimes said (when I showed signs of what she called controlling behaviour) that he should have been the anarchist and I should have been the Communist...but let that pass.

Richard and I got on well. We talked journalism and politics; we enjoyed meals, in restaurants and at home; we played squash and tennis together; and I introduced him to what might have been his heritage, had he been born in the East End of London rather than bourgeois Kensington: watching and supporting Tottenham Hotspur. He was adamant, though, that he was not "Jewish" – that was an accident of birth (followed by circumcision) that he refused to accept was going to blight his life: ex-Jewish he certainly was, just as I was an ex-Catholic, but that was the end of the matter. Having spent some time in Palestine as a young man, he certainly saw the modern state of Israel as an aggressive, imperialist force rather than as a haven.

One incident stands out. His younger brother, Edward Kisch, a successful accountant, was the extended-family entertainer – Guy Fawkes night, Christmas evening party, summer sports day – and once he summoned us to Brighton for a birthday/anniversary Sunday lunch at Wheeler's fish restaurant. It was the perfect invitation: we licked our lips. Only trouble was, when we got to Brighton we found a picket outside the restaurant: the staff were in dispute with the management over pay and conditions. Richard and I (and our partners, both union members) were clear – oysters and Chablis were off, alas. The four of us went to the pub.

Richard was one of the early casualties of the Spanish Civil War – almost certainly the first British one. In his popular history book about the war* he describes "the extraordinary atmosphere of exhilaration" in Barcelona in the summer of 1936 as foreigners flocked to join the popular resistance to the Nationalist uprising led by General Franco. Richard was one of four young people on the fringes of journalism and politics who travelled together by train from London to Perpignan in southern France and crossed the frontier on foot.**

**They Shall Not Pass: The Spanish People at War 1936-9*, Wayland, 1974

**The other three were: Tony Willis, like Richard an ex-public schoolboy who'd been an army cadet; Lee Aylward, a Canadian woman; and her companion, Paul Boyle.

Because two of the four were Trotskyists they all joined the POUM* militia, rather than that of the anarchists or the Communist-orientated PSUC, to take part in the attempt to recapture the island of Mallorca from Franco's forces. The attempt failed and Richard was wounded. According to the *Daily Worker* in a report sent from Barcelona: "Richard Kisch, a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, is in hospital here...Kisch was stooping forward, climbing uphill when a machine-gun bullet entered behind the shoulder and passed out through the ribs at the back."

*the POUM, which George Orwell also joined, was the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista; the PSUC was the regional Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (as opposed to the national PSOE, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español)

You could say that, after being hit, Richard was lucky: his militia comrades got him back on a stretcher to their ship and he recovered well enough to live an active life – but some other people who took part in the invasion certainly weren't lucky. In the confusion of retreat some of the dead and wounded were left behind; survivors were shot by the Nationalists. According to the historian Paul Preston: "Prisoners captured by the rebels were immediately executed. They included five nurses, all aged between 17 and 20, and a French journalist."*

* *The Spanish Holocaust*, Harper Press, 2012

Although Amanda and I failed to find the place where Richard was wounded we stayed quite by chance at a country hotel run by a woman who turned out to be the grand-daughter of two men who had fought in the Spanish Civil War – on opposite sides. She made it clear that her sympathies were with the one who'd been a member of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT and was visibly moved when we told her why we had come. She gave us an important local contact** who introduced us to another.

** Bartomeu Gari Salleras (author of "Porreres: desfilades de dia, afusellaments de nit", 2007) and Antoni Tugores (author of "La Guerra civil a Manacor: la Guerra a casa", 2006).

I can't agree with Preston's use of the word "holocaust" to describe the killings in Spain but the savagery he documents in what followed the battle for Mallorca certainly explains the inflation of language. To emphasise the point quoted above: he says that every single person taken prisoner by Franco's forces after the failure of the Republican attempt to regain Mallorca was slaughtered, whether wounded or not. And the killings of civilians that followed – "at least 1,200 and probably as many as two thousand" – were clearly examples of pre-emptive strike rather than reprisal.

Here is another account: "In Mallorca there were no crimes to avenge so [Fascist terrorism] could only have been a preventive action, the systematic extermination of suspects." This quote comes from *A diary of my times*, the English version of a book on the Mallorca killings by the French right-wing Catholic writer Georges Bernanos. He has no sympathy with the left and admits that "on principle I had nothing against a coup d'état by the Falange" but he is shocked by their reign of terror. "For months in Mallorca killer gangs...shot down in cold blood for everybody to see thousands of persons who were held to be suspect but against whom the military tribunals could not produce the faintest legal allegation."

In a preface to the second edition of his book he answers a critical Jesuit reviewer of the first by saying: "It was not so much the awful killings which disgusted me as the fact that they were approved by the great majority of secular priests, monks and nuns..." What makes Bernanos a convincing witness is the fact that he comes from the other side; he is particularly disgusted by the Mallorca killings because his lot – the right-wing Catholics – have lost the moral high ground; they're in the gutter with what he obviously sees as the revolutionary scum.

But here's a response to Bernanos from an unexpected quarter: Simone Weil, the Jewish radical quasi-Catholic mystic who at the start of the Spanish Civil War is emphatically in the revolutionary camp. She tells Bernanos that her natural sympathies are with the anarchists, which is why she goes to Barcelona in August 1936 and joins the Durruti column. But she is shocked and disillusioned

because a 15-year-old boy, fighting with the Falange, is captured and then executed because he refuses to join the anarchists.

Weil also provides a chilling postscript to the failed attempt to retake Mallorca. She writes that she is in Sitges on the Costa Brava in September when the militia return having lost nine of the 40 who set out from there. The following night there are nine punitive raids – and nine “fascists” or so-called fascists are killed “in a small town where in July nothing happened”. As Preston shows, the Franco forces commit by far the greater part of the atrocities – but the Republican side are also guilty of senseless killing and the anarchists are prominent in this.

So I don't think there is any “moral high ground” in the Spanish Civil War. I think that is the most important point. But the next question is why. Why was there such brutality, cruelty, savagery? On the Franco side I don't see a difficulty in understanding what took place. The various elements of the Franco coalition – the landed gentry/aristocracy, the officer class of the army, the explicitly fascist Falange, the hierarchy of the Catholic church – were individually and collectively committed to the extirpation of the anti-Christ, the Reds, the revolting proletariat. The unashamed personal account of Gonzalo de Aguilera Munro lining up his tenants and shooting six of them *pour encourager les autres* shows a total disregard for a lower form of life. It's like the contempt of Europeans for native Africans, of white southern Americans for their black slaves.

But what about the libertarian left, the revolutionaries and dreamers and planners of the good life?

The best attempt I have read to explain why so much blood was spilt by, if you like, our side, the goodies, the people who believed in the future, the free society – above all, the anarchists – is by Gerald Brenan in *The Spanish Labyrinth**. He points out that Spain never experienced a successful Protestant Reformation in the 16th century; so in 1936 Spanish peasants and workers were reacting against centuries of oppression by the Catholic church, a hypocritical and tyrannical ally of the ruling classes.

*CUP, 1960

What followed was revenge and a settling of accounts but also a moral crusade against what the revolutionaries saw as an evil to be extirpated: churches were sacked and sometimes burnt; priests, monks and nuns – as well as bosses and landlords – were humiliated, brutalised and killed; thus the way was cleared for libertarian communism. If it helps, you could see the bloodletting as a throwback to the savagery of the Thirty Years War in 17th-century Europe between Catholic and Protestant – and don't forget, much closer to home, the killing and torture of civilians in Northern Ireland carried out by the murderous gangs on both sides, Catholic and Protestant, with the British army guilty of its own atrocities.

Inevitably, with active support from Hitler and Mussolini – and the “non-intervention” (that's to say compliance) of, particularly, Britain and France – Franco won the war in 1939; and for another 36 years until his death he imposed an authoritarian straitjacket on the Spanish people. Subsequent attempts to revive anarchism as a mass movement – Europe's only one worthy of the name – have ended in failure. As a whole the Spanish now have no appetite for revolutionary struggle and in the case of the Mallorcans they never showed much, though many certainly suffered for their opposition to Franco. Today Mallorca is, mainly, a tourist destination specialising in sun, sea and sangria.

As for me, I last waved the black anarchist flag half a century ago. Am I an anarchist today? Certainly, I am in the negative sense of opposing the authority of the state in principle; the imposition of compulsory state schooling with its glorification of “British values”; the taxation of the poor so that

the rich can continue to flaunt their wealth; the use of the “armed forces” in foreign conflicts and the constant threatening of war, whether nuclear or not; and the control of everyday life by police, law courts and prisons. Certainly I don’t vote in British parliamentary elections (for years, as a veteran expat, I didn’t even have the right to). But if anarchism is activism I’m not entitled to claim to be anything more than a sympathetic spectator of today’s radical libertarian movements – an armchair anarchist, if you like.

St Aulaye, July 2022

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