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***BECOMING VISIBLE AND REAL:  
IMAGES OF REPUBLICAN WOMEN DURING THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR***

DOLORES MARTÍN MORUNO

**Abstract**

Following Donna Haraway's (1988) doctrine of embodied objectivity, I analyze the construction of the notion of woman in the visual culture produced during the Spanish Civil War, by considering different women's roles as militiawomen, political leaders, nurses, and workers in the munitions factories. A selection of photographs of the Republican women during the Spanish Civil War reveals how the modern wars of the first half of the 20th century should not be considered exclusively a male domain because women became publicly visible and a political power in their fight against fascism. As it occurred with other North American and European women during World War I and World War II, Spanish women joined the labor forces with the outbreak of the Civil War, becoming aware of their subjugated position for the first time in history. Therefore, the images depicting Republican women mirrored not only the legal and social rights conquered by women since the proclamation of the Second Spanish Republic in 1931, but they also embodied their emancipation and, furthermore, the roots of Spanish Feminism, a movement which has been repressed for a long-time by Francisco Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975).

**Keywords:** Visual Culture; Gender Studies; Spanish Civil War; Women's war experience; Spanish Feminism; Second Spanish Republic.

**Reading Gender in Spanish War Photography**

This article explores the representation of Republican women during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) through a selection of photographs, in order to show their political participation in the conflict and, furthermore, to interpret their particular experience in wartime (see Figure 1). The relevance of a visual analysis on this subject stems from the premise that these images could illuminate the ways in which women became visible in Spanish society during the war. Therefore, I will consider these photographs as "visual possibilities, each with a wonderful, detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds" according to the embodied nature of all vision (Haraway, 1988, p. 583).

The Spanish Civil War was a complex historical process, which broke out with the offensive led by right-wing officers of the Spanish Army against the Second Republic on the 18th July 1936. When the *coup d'état* was declared, the Spanish Republic Government remained completely paralyzed and the first reaction came from the population, including women and children, who took up in arms against the rebels in the main cities of Spain. On the home front and, in particular, in the city of Barcelona, Anarchist and Socialist workers collectivized factories and industries, proclaiming the Spanish Social Revolution (Chomsky & Pateman, 2005). Despite the initial enthusiasm of the population against the rebel troops led by General Francisco Franco, the Social Revolution became a multifaceted conflict, which was more than a simple civil war, but also the political arena involving international forces such as Benito Mussolini's Italian Fascism, Adolf Hitler's Nazism, and the Stalinism coming from Moscow.<sup>1</sup> As it is well known, this international dimension, which would play a decisive role in the World War II, finally gave the victory to Franco's Fascism on the 1st April 1939.

In the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, the Republican women were twofold losers, because they suffered not only the sexist prejudices of their male Republican comrades during the war, but also the further

1. I have presented a paper about the complexity of the historical reconstruction of the Spanish Civil War "George Orwell's Homage to Catalonia: Rethinking the Spanish Civil War" in the International Conference "Orwell, a political conscience of the XXth century," which took place in the University of Lille III (19-20 March, 2010). The abstract can be consulted at <http://evenements.univ-lille3.fr/colloque-george-orwell?Abstracts>

repression of Franco's dictatorship (1939-75), which forced them to return to the domestic sphere, suppressing their identity as active workers in society. Moreover, Franco's dictatorship exerted a brutal repression against the memories of these women during almost forty years, enforcing the collective historical amnesia on the active presence of women leaders, women's organization's and mass female mobilization during the Civil War (Ackelsberg, 1991; Nash, 1995).

My goal in the study presented here is to uncover the memories of these Republican women through a selection of photographs, following Donna Haraway's approach, i.e. "a feminist writing of the body that metaphorically emphasizes vision" in order to produce, what she calls "**situated knowledges**" (Haraway, 1988, pp. 581-2). According to this thesis, I will interpret these images differently, with other eyes, in order to analyze the cultural ways in which the notion of women has been constructed during the Spanish Civil War (Bloom, 1988). This partial perspective will allow us to see how women "have been there," engaged with the Republican cause throwing light upon spaces, where they exerted political action during the war (Haraway, 1988; Barthes, 1964). Seen in this light, Spanish women became visible as trousered militia-women, political leaders, wartime nurses, and as workers producing munitions. With this aim in mind, I will contextualize the selected photographs for in-depth analysis by first introducing the relationships between war and photography with a specific focus on how women have been represented in the visual culture produced during the wars that occurred in the first half of the 20th century.

### Photography and War

The interest of photography for analyzing the phenomenon of war has been sufficiently well established by several works, such as those of Caroline Brothers (1997), Mary Warner (2002), and Susan Sontag (2003). Photography and war have maintained a longstanding relationship, which has its roots in the Mexican-American War (1846-48), when newspapers included for the first time lithographs in order to inform public opinion about the conflict. In this context, images became influential as journalism, as well as in the development of photography.

However, it was during the Crimean War (1854-56), when personalities such as Roger Fenton (1819-69) used photography oriented to ideological purposes. Fenton is known as "[...] the first war photographer having been sent to Crimea in early 1855 by the British government [...]," who was charged with the official mission "[...] to give another, more positive impression of the increasingly unpopular war [...]" (Sontag, 2003, p. 48). Thus, Fenton as the first war photographer "was faced with transforming the real into the symbolic, and with finding or staging heart-rending incidents," establishing photography as a central element of modern propaganda (Warner, 2002, p. 46). Later, with the American Civil War (1861-1865), photography became an essential instrument in the army to record war experience and with the Great War (1914-18), photography is democratized through the amateurs' albums created by the soldiers on the frontlines of the war.

Unlike earlier wars, the Spanish Civil War was "the first war to be extensively and freely photographed for a mass audience" (Brothers, 1997, p. 2). Well-known non-Spanish photographers engaged with the Republican ideal including Robert Capa (1913-1954), Gerda Taro (1910-1937), Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004), and Spanish photojournalists, including José Díaz Casariego (1905-1970), who immortalized moments through their lenses that have been recorded deeply in our collective memory, such as Capa's *Falling Soldier* (1936). In comparison to other conflicts, the visual culture produced during the Spanish Civil War is an ideal context to explore the transformations on the same notion of war, because images were used as instruments of persuasion and propaganda. In this respect, images became weapons for fighting in a modern way, i.e., when war is understood as a visual event (Virilio, 1989).<sup>2</sup> Some technological progress made this photography revolution possible such as the commercialization of new cameras like the *Leica*, which were easier to use and could take a number of photographs in a short time period.

In this war of images, the representation of women took a central

2. Another International Conference was celebrated last year in commemoration of the end of the Spanish Civil War in the Trinity College of Dublin, *Agonía Republicana: Living the Death of an Era*, where I have presented an interpretation of photographs of Republican women as weapons according to Paul Virilio's thesis, "Armas contra el Fascismo" (Weapons against Fascism). [http://www.tcd.ie/Hispanic\\_Studies/Agonia-Conference/](http://www.tcd.ie/Hispanic_Studies/Agonia-Conference/)

place within the visual rhetoric used by the Republican side for mirroring an emerging model of the woman worker, economically independent and who became conscious of her cultural, social, and sexual slavery. On the contrary, the Nationalist rebels vindicated through their propaganda a paradigm of womanhood, which was based on the sexual differentiation of gender roles: the perfect married lady, ultra-conservative and Catholic, confined to the domestic sphere.

However, from a feminist analysis of embodied objectivity,<sup>3</sup> these photographs of the Republican women reveal how they were not pacifists, but rather personalities politically engaged in the same cause of their comrades. In this way, these images are especially relevant to deconstruct the idea that war has been essentially a male domain, in which women should be considered only as victims, i.e., what Georges Mosse has called “the myth of war experience”. This myth has emphasized a conception of war, which was “[...] noble, chivalric, and, above all, masculine [...]” (Mosse, 1990, p. 198). Furthermore, this association of war to virile context has been reinforced throughout the iconography created for imaging war, in which the protagonist has been the heroic soldier fighting on the front. On the contrary, women have been usually represented as victims, sending their sons to die for the Fatherland and suffering passively the consequences of the war on the home front, such as the lack of aliments, and proliferation of epidemics and rapes. Even if men have been depicted during the wars that occurred in the first half of the 20th century as having the monopoly of violence, women cannot be regarded only as secondary characters (Nash & Tavera, 2002).

### Women in War Photography

As Margaret H. Darrow has suggested, the introduction of women in modern wars was marked by the nursing movement led by Florence

3. I follow Donna Haraway’s doctrine of embodied objectivity, because it is intimately linked to a theory of vision, in order to develop the further visual analysis. In this respect, Haraway’s feminist approach aims at deconstructing the mythically gaze, which has the power to see and not to be seen, i.e., the gaze of Man and White. Therefore, feminist objectivity can only be defined from a partial perspective or what she calls “situated knowledges”. Haraway’s article is available on line at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/6725621/Haraway-Situated-Knowledge>

Nightingale (1820-1910) during the Crimean War. Then, women became official members of the military going to the front and being like the soldiers in a patriotic tone. War photography, in this era, documented the Army Nursing Services since the First World War, when women joined the front “[...] as clean, solicitous, white-robed and veiled nurses [...] becoming the best possible parallel to the soldier [...]” (Darrow, 1996, p. 83). However, even if women joined the army, they continued to be represented in the universe of care as civil servants “according to the middle-class cult of domesticity prevailing in this period” (Summers, 1988, p.21).

It was during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), when photography depicted certain armed young women as warriors who broke with the traditional representation of gender roles, such as the famous *soldadera* “**Adelita and her friends**.”<sup>4</sup> Adelita was most likely created by J. Hernandez in 1912 and introduced as a model of armed woman, which was imagined in popular culture as a young and lively armed girl, picaresque, promiscuous, selfless and, overall, having a “heart of gold” (Linhard, 2005, p. 44). The Mexican model of revolutionary women had its roots in the long European tradition of Romantic and idealist images of Liberty as a woman in arms, such as the *Marianne* represented in Eugène Delacroix’s *La Liberté Guidant le Peuple* (1831). Furthermore, the *soldadera* should be considered a surviving element of a gendered cultural and symbolic imagery of war and revolution, which had its continuation in the young Spanish *miliciana*.

During the summer of 1936, Spanish young girls joined the front to fight against the fascist military. This event was widely photographed by the International Press in newspapers such as, the French *Regards* or the British *The Daily Herald* provoking significant discussions about what should be women’s roles in wartime, because they symbolized a model of virile womanhood. Like the mythological figure of the Amazon, whose Greek term *a-mazós* literally means “without breast,” the militia-women were imagined mutilating their right breasts to shoot with more precision (Iriarte, 2003, p. 20). In this way, we can find headlines as the

4. “La Adelita and her friends” is reproduced in John Mraz (2006), ¿Qué tiene de Nueva la historia gráfica? Elementos 61(13), p. 49. <http://www.elementos.buap.mx/num61/hm/49.htm>

following published on the 26th July 1936 in *Reynolds' News*, which compared openly the two figures: “The Spanish Amazons in the Thick of the Fight” (Brothers, 1997, p. 83). As Amazons, the militiawomen were perceived in English opinion as androgynous symbols, which broke with traditional gender roles because they refused their role as mothers in order to fight against a male enemy.

Besides their role in the militia, women mobilized in mass toward the war effort against fascism. As Ingrid Strobl has observed, this war involved a radical social change for Spanish women, giving them the opportunity to step into the jobs that men had left vacant. This fact allowed them “to reach a fresh appreciation of themselves,” as had occurred in the case of North American and European women during the World Wars. Spanish women “were asked to display qualities and aptitudes, which for centuries, they had been denied” (Strobl, 2008, p. 18).

When the war broke out, many women’s associations including *The Antifascists Women Organization* (AMA) controlled by the Communist Party, *The Female Secretariat of the POUM* (the women’s bureau of the dissident Marxist party) and *Mujeres Libres* (*Free Women of Spain*, which was the anarchist women’s organization that defended anarcho-feminism) began a cultural offensive against women’s illiteracy. Through the creation of an educational program oriented to alleviate the lack of women’s professional training, they addressed one of the fundamental reasons for the work segregation of women in Spain. As we shall see through the following visual analysis, women’s mobilization during the Spanish Civil War indicated not only their political participation in the conflict, but moreover the emergence of their consciousness as women who had been slaves of male civilization.

### Warrior Women

The first image selected for discussion is signed by Casariego’s Graphic Reportages, a label that was managed by José Díaz Casariego, who fought on the Republican side as a pilot during the Spanish Civil War and took many photographs during the conflict capturing the consequences of fascist bombardments in Spain’s capital city, Madrid. However, amongst the photographs preserved with his signature in the

archives of *Anselmo Lorenzo* Foundation, those of militiawomen are of special interest to reconstruct the roots of Spanish Feminism by means of a gendered icon, which emerged with the proclamation of the Social Revolution.



Figure 1. *The Republican People’s Army Heroine*. Anselmo Lorenzo Foundation (Madrid, Spain).

“The Heroine of the Republican People’s Army” (see Figure 1) was probably taken during the winter of 1936 in the mountains of Madrid, when Republicans defended the capital against fascist troops. This image is accompanied with a brief commentary explaining how “each woman of the Republican People’s Army has become an heroine, who goes to the front with decisiveness.” The unknown young girl in this photograph symbolically represented all armed women, who joined the front during the first stage of Spanish Civil War. As Fostner has shown, these girls were commonly known in the propaganda of that time as the “roses of the war,” which was a metaphor

of their ideological engagement with Socialism (symbolized with the color is red) and of their unbroken will against adversity and thereby, they had thorns (Fostner, 2003, p. 202).

In particular, this photograph (see Figure 1) depicts a young, beautiful, smiling, confident militiawoman holding a rifle, which lies on her left shoulder to emphasize her engagement with the revolutionary ideals in placing the rifle close to her heart. Her feminine long curly hair contrast with a costume that is essentially military and, thereby,

associated with a masculine culture such as the military cap and rifle, giving an impression of breaking with the established gender roles. The lens captured the attitude of this smiling young girl, as she poses proudly. Therefore, her enthusiasm mirrored the awareness of her necessary fight as a woman, claiming armed violence as a way for expressing women's emancipation.

In this way, the *miliciana* took up arms, not only to defend the legal rights that she and her sisters had gained since the proclamation of the Second Spanish Republic such as the right to vote in 1934, but also to define her identity against the patriarchal system. Patriarchy was understood as the male domination exerted throughout history by the state and the class divisions according to the feminist approach of *Mujeres Libres*. This group represented the most radical faction of the women's associations during the Spanish Civil War and was inspired by the ideas of **Emma Goldman** (1869-1940), who visited her sympathizers in Spain on several occasions. In the words of Suceso Portales, one of the leaders of this female group:

Two things have begun to collapse because they are unjust, class privilege based on parasitical civilization which gave birth to the monster of war; and male privilege, which turned half of mankind into autonomous beings and the other half into slaves; a male civilization based on power has produced moral chaos throughout the centuries. (Magazine *Mujeres Libres*, 1937, 2nd year of the Revolution, n° 10)

Furthermore, the young *miliciana* photographed in Figure 1 is wearing an overall, which was generally blue and symbolized the Spanish working class, becoming quickly the unofficial uniform of the militia and, moreover, a fashion in the main cities collectivized in Spain (Orwell, 1938). The blue overall allowed militiawomen to move freely, in contrast to female dresses, which represented their role as slaves. Thus, Spanish women, for the first time in history, wore trousers in society to break with the longstanding tradition of male civilization. In this way, wearing the blue overall indicated, "that the *milicianas* were internalizing certain male perceptions" (Linhard, 2005, p. 56). They adopted other masculine

elements for vindicating a new conception of womanhood, and demanded the rights to exercise a women's option not to have children and to live sexuality free, without being married, in what they called "Free Love" (Magazine *Mujeres Libres*, July, 1936, n°3).

During the Spanish Civil War, photographs such as Figure 1 appealed to a particular mythological background related to heroines who had fought for women's rights such as Agustina de Aragón, who was involved during the Spanish War of Independence (1808-1814) against Napoleon Bonaparte's Army, or Mariana Pineda who became a symbol of the Liberal cause against the absolutism of Fernando VII, and Aída Lafuente, who died fighting in the October Revolution of 1934 (Bunk, 2003).<sup>5</sup>

As mentioned in the previous section, images like these were viewed and understood as extremely scandalous symbols by international public opinion, because they showed that women had dared to take up arms, which were historically and culturally the property of men. As an example, in the French Press such as the magazine *Regards* militiawomen were portrayed more like the *Marianne* or the *pétroleuses* of the Paris Commune, i.e., the French women who were accused of burning the streets of Paris during May of 1871 during the French Revolutionary War. The French *prétroleuse* as the Spanish *miliciana* were imagined as lost women, living in disorder or as prostitutes, who joined the front to have sexual experiences and who were sometimes, "lesbians," a term that acquired its current meaning during the Paris Commune (Higgonet, 2002, p. 112).

Because of the negative propaganda, Spanish society changed its original opinion on the revolutionary model that represented the *miliciana*: a young girl, who went to the front and was capable of playing an active part in the elaboration of the future. By February of 1937, women were discredited in the militia by the Republican Government and were signaled as the cause of venereal diseases at the front. In this way, the experience of the Spanish *miliciana* was marked by the sexual discrimination exerted not only by their male companions, but also by the most conservative women of the Communist and Socialist Party, who

5. Spanish heroines were represented in war posters, which can be consulted in the Archive of the Spanish Ministry of Culture. <http://pares.mcu.es/cartelesGC/servlets/visOrServlet?cartel=329&page=1&from=busqueda>

defined their place as traditional service in the home (Lannon, 1991). From this time, women were forbidden to go to the front and were forced to create other social spaces to accomplish their political struggle. In spite of this, militiawomen became undisputed icons in Republican war propaganda and continued to be reproduced, but only as images that would have no real basis and that were only a fetish addressed to satiate male heterosexual soldier's sexual impulses.

### The Political Leader

To continue with this visual analysis oriented to establish in which ways the notion of women was culturally constructed during the Spanish Civil War, I examine another image, which relates women's experience to political power. The second photograph (See Figure 2) exemplifies the role of Spanish women as political leaders and shows Federica Montseny (1905-94), a known anarchist leader and minister of the recently created Minister of Health and Social Assistance from November 1936 to May 1937.



Figure 2. *Federica Montseny giving a speech*. Montjuich Cementery. 20th November, 1938. *Anselmo Lorenzo* Foundation.

Federica Montseny was one of the first women to be promoted as a minister in Europe and she was aware of her responsibility, appointing two other women to accomplish relevant positions in the Ministry: Amparo Poch y Gascón and Mercedes Maestre, manager of Social Assistance and Secretary of the Ministry of Health, respectively. Poch y Gascón was also a physician by profession and wrote about a new approach to medicine from a humanistic point of view. The reforms of the Ministry of Health were oriented by the concept of humanist medicine, which connected illness not only to physiological conditions, but also to the consequences of certain social conditions such as hygiene practices, that affected the working class more than the middle or upper classes. This photograph (see Figure 2) entitled "Federica Montseny giving a speech in front of a microphone" was taken the 20th of November of 1938 in the Montjuich's Cemetery. Behind Montseny, there are two other anarchist leaders who accepted political posts in Francisco Largo Caballero's Government, Antonio García and Ricardo Sanz, Minister of Justice and General Inspector of Cataluña and Aragón Fronts, respectively. The textual notes are especially helpful to understand this photograph and the type of speech, which Montseny is giving, because on the 20th of November 1936, two years earlier, Buenaventura Durruti's funeral, one the most popular anarchist leaders in Spain, was held in this same place. Furthermore, Montseny, García Oliver and Ricardo Sanz were very close to Durruti and, thereby, we can consider this photography as a commemoration of Durruti's death.

Montseny is presented as the protagonist of the visual composition, while she is captured in full discursive action, facing the microphone and emphasizing the power of the speech, the essential expression for political action (Arendt, 2006). She wears glasses, an element, which reinforces her intellectual aspect, giving a fresh representation of woman in Spain, that contrasts with the major level of women's illiteracy at that time (Nash, 1995). Moreover, this photography of Montseny, signifies that in Spanish Society women began to have their own voices and were politically conscious of their essential role in the defense of the Second Spanish Republic.

However, we can read this image differently if we realize that no one in the audience, which was composed exclusively by men, seems to pay attention to her speech. Thus, Montseny appears metaphorically alone, in the universe of politics, revealing the discrimination that women historically suffered in this context. Political power continued to be considered as a cultural symbol of virility. Therefore, the *Mater Dolorosa*, who sent their children to die for the Republic, represented by the Communist leader Dolores Ibarruri (1895-1989), known also as *La Pasionaria*, would replace the model of woman, in contrast to Montseny who did not embody motherhood as a central characteristic for defining women in politics. When the Communist Party crushed the Spanish Social Revolution during the so-called Days of May, the question of women's cultural and social liberation was forgotten in order to focus on the main objective, which was to win the war.<sup>6</sup>

### Republican Nurses who had Replaced the Nuns

As discussed earlier in this essay, military nurses were the best possible parallel to the image of the soldier during the World Wars. In contrast to Virginia Woolf's thesis published in *Three Guineas* (1938), a work that had been written during the Spanish Civil War, Spanish women did not refuse "to make munitions or nurse the wounded" (Woolf, 2006, p. 210). After March 1937, the Republican Government forbade militia-women to continue their fight and the only way they could participate at the front "was wearing nurse's uniforms" (Coleman, 1999, p. 50).

The following photograph (see Figure 3) shows precisely this change of perception on women's roles. The distinction of costumes that men and women are wearing in Figure 3 as militiamen and nurses established gender definitions. The four nurses are photographed as the female equivalent image of the two militiamen, who look proudly at the lens showing their war wounds.

In contrast to the male representation, nurses' gaze is portrayed

6. See also Thomas (2001, p. 637) to understand what involved the "Days of May," when a tragic confrontation occurred between Communists, Trotskyites, and Anarchists in the streets of Barcelona, and it concluded with the elimination of all factions that did not belong to the Communist Party.

with certain shyness and only one of the four nurses dared to pose in front of the camera revealing one of the central values related to the image of the nurse, i.e., obedience. In the hierarchy of the hospital, nurses were under the authority of the physicians and played a role related to their sensibility, by means of the virtues of altruistic care. As Florence Nightingale advocated, nursing "was not just head knowledge, it also involved the hands and the heart" (Bradshaw, 2001, p. 23).



Figure 3. F. Vidal, *Nurses who have replaced Nuns in the Hospital carefully looking after injured militiamen*. Anselmo Lorenzo Foundation.

The title of the photograph (see Figure 3) "Nurses who have replaced Nuns in the Hospital carefully looking after injured militiamen" introduced a new model of professional nurse in Spain, in contrast to the religious image of the nun (see Figure 4). With the outbreak of the war, most of women dedicated to health care were Catholic nuns and they joined the rebel side putting the Spanish Government in a delicate situation. Therefore, the Ministry of Health Care promoted official nursing courses, which were supported by various trade unions and were aimed at alleviating the lack of professional nurses who were not nuns. These courses were not only focused on training nurses in anatomy, hygiene

and physiology, but they were also oriented to form a moral character, i.e., the nursing vocation. Thus, the nursing vocation was understood according to the various ideological interpretations existing in the context of the Spanish Civil War. “Nursing had not only professional, but also political implications and it became a way for women to demonstrate their patriotism” (Martín Moruno & Ordóñez Rodríguez, 2009, p. 308).



Figure 4. *Nuns in the Hospital of Nuestra Señora de Gracia.*  
Committee International of the Red Cross (Geneva, Switzerland).

The four nurses that replaced the nuns in health care community (see Figure 3) are not wearing an official uniform belonging to the Spanish Red Cross corps and, therefore, they were probably volunteers, who were professionally trained during the war. Unlike the nurses belonging to the Spanish Red Cross corps, who justified nursing care through values such as Christian charity, these professional nurses justified their activities on values related to the trade unions, such as the solidarity with the working class. This can be seen in Figure 3 through the representation of

the two militiamen, who are not wearing an official uniform like soldiers, but rather, civilian clothes. In conclusion, this photograph presents a new image of secular nurses, professionally trained and socially recognized as workers for the first time in Spanish history.

### Women Workers Making Munitions



Figure 5. *Manufacturing War Materials. Barcelona.*  
Anselmo Lorenzo Foundation.

The last photograph (see Figure 5), that I have selected, shows one of the central roles played by women in war-time: the production of munitions in the rearguard. Contrary to the militiawoman (see Figure 1), this image reveals how women’s role were defined on the home front in

order to make the weapons, which men would use at the front.

The two women photographed in Figure 5 seem to be assembling parts of weapons almost mechanically and mimetically. One woman wears an overall, the symbol of the working class during the first stage of the Spanish Civil War, and the other appears in her civilian clothes. This difference reveals a contraposition between two representations of women: as workers who have a right and simply as volunteers, who have a duty with the Second Republic and, thereby, joined the labor forces in the common war effort.

As it occurred during World War I, when the powerful image of a North American woman worker emerged in propaganda posters, the two Spanish women (see Figure 5) were captured perfectly aligned, within a symmetrical image, creating the impression that they are accomplishing rational and efficient work in the defense of the Republic. This photograph shows the active participation of women as volunteers in the

rearguard, a reality imposed since the spring of 1937 when the Republican government began to promote the slogan “Men to front, Women to work” (*Mujeres Libres*, 1936, p. 4).

However, this photograph reveals that women did not understand their activity as merely pacific, but rather how the whole civil society was engaged in the conflict. Therefore, this image depicting two women manufacturing weapons in Barcelona shows that the Spanish Civil War, like World War I, was a total war, “where front line and home front were blurred with the consequent dissolving of gender distinctions” (Keene, 2002, p. 194). In this way, the integration of women as workers in society gave a new perception to themselves, becoming aware of their social struggle against male civilization.

### Becoming Visible and Real Women

Women became visible in public through their roles as militia-women, political leaders, wartime nurses, and as workers producing military materials. Looking back to the Spanish Civil War, these photographs reveal not only the different ways in which women have been culturally represented, but, furthermore, how they became visible, embodying metaphorically their political participation. Contrary to the image of women as victims who suffered the consequences of war on the home front, these photographs are testimony that women participated actively during the Spanish Civil War and, moreover, that they became conscious of their subjugated position, vindicating their liberation from sexual discrimination. The images of the revolutionary young *miliciana*, of the radical leftist Federica Montseny, the professional nurses and the volunteer workers are central to the discussion about how women constituted a real political power during the Spanish Civil War. While each of these activities cannot be considered strictly political, when Franco won the war, many of these women were not only unwelcomed but also persecuted, tortured, violated and imprisoned, accused of being “red whores” (Preston, 2006, p. 207). Almost forty years of Franco’s dictatorship have silenced the memories of these women, who were on the losing side of the war, but were also destined to become domestic slaves to marriage and procreation, and who rarely had the opportunity to receive an education to achieve a

professional career. When Spanish Democracy was approved in 1977, the political parties agreed to the famous *Pact of Forgetting* (*Pacto del Olvido*) reinforcing the oblivion of around 300,000 persons killed in the civil war itself; some 440,000 Republicans who went into exile and the 10,000 souls who died in Nazi concentration camps (Davis, 2005).

Even in contemporary times, after the Parliament approved José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero’s law of the Historical Memory in 2007, the Spanish Civil War continues to be a controversial episode. As an editorial published on the 8th April 2010 in *The New York Times* reports, the judge, Baltasar Garzón, who has tried unsuccessfully to investigate the disappearances during Spain’s 1930s civil war and the decades of Franco’s repression that followed, could be soon condemned for initiating this process. *The New York Times* concludes: “Spain needs an honest accounting of its troubled past, not prosecution of those who have the courage to demand it” (*New York Times*, 2010, p. 26).<sup>7</sup>

According to this opinion, Garzón’s frustrated initiative should be seen as a new victory of Franco in contemporary Spanish society, even if he died more than thirty years ago. This reveals the urgency to create an objective account of this historical epoch and in particular, of those Republican women who were the least powerful but also the bravest combatants during the Spanish Civil War. With this aim in mind, I have interpreted these photographs to uncover their memories against this forced oblivion, as the roots of Spanish feminism.

7. Editorial (2010 April, 8). An Injustice in Spain. The New York Times available online in <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/09/opinion/09fri2.html>

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