

Miguel Ángel del Arco Blanco

La hambruna española

Barcelona, Spain: Editorial Crítica, 2025

ISSN 978-84-9199-801-3, €22.70. 476pp.

The historian Miguel Ángel del Arco Blanco, a specialist in the Spanish Civil War and Franco's dictatorship, highlights the two main objectives of his book at the end of the introduction:

This is, above all, a history book. But through history, it aims to achieve two further things. The first is to preserve memory and remembrance (...) And the second is to denounce inequality and the use of hunger as a weapon of violence and oppression (p. 31).¹

By combining an analysis of the causes, actors, politics and consequences of the famine with a broader historiography, Del Arco offers a 'comprehensive overview' of the Spanish famine and a better understanding of other European famines that ravaged the twentieth century. This work is also aimed at a general audience, one steeped in memories of the 'years of famine'. Throughout the book, this audience will find 'short personal stories that help us relive those terrible days of black bread' (p. 25), as well as oral testimonies, songs, literature and films that encapsulate the lives of the starving during those years.

Structured into four sections, the work opens with an introduction showing how the book's concept draws on earlier historiography developed following the fall of the dictatorship, an international historiography related to other historical famines, and on the recovering historical memory that began in Spain at the start of this century. In this context, the author grounds his thesis in social history and collective memory of the famine. He then defines what he means by famine – a definition that links biological and political factors – arguing the need for a multidisciplinary approach that spans the history of medicine, economic and cultural history, historical demography and political history. Following this introduction, he outlines the book's central theses and how each section addresses them.

The first part outlines the causes of the famine and the role actually played by the consequences of the civil war, the regime's autarkic policies, its pro-fascist orientation, the regime's corruption, and the repression inflicted on the defeated in provoking and exacerbating the famine. In this section, the author makes two points clear: that the famine was caused and exacerbated by human decisions, and how it was concealed or distorted by the regime itself.

The second part outlines the Spanish famine, seeking to show when it occurred, in which parts of Spain it was more severe, and who its main victims were. This analysis highlights the Spanish famine as comparable to other, more internationally recognised famines. The disaster had two main phases:

1. Unless otherwise is said, all the translations in this review are mine.

one between 1939 and 1942, and 1946 known as the ‘year of famine’. The worst-affected areas were the most socially polarised and agricultural regions of southern Spain. Likewise, the main victims were former Republicans, particularly those imprisoned, wage labourers, single women, the elderly and children, especially ‘those babies who had just been born or who had not yet reached their first year of life’ (p. 138). Supported by medical practitioners, Franco’s regime concealed these deaths through silence and falsified death certificates or causes of death.

Beyond direct starvation, Del Arco analyses the prevalence of diseases linked to severe food shortages, such as pellagra, tuberculosis and starvation oedema. These diseases were far deadlier than starvation itself. While illness is socially blind, Del Arco highlights how starvation often accompanied many of these conditions, blurring the line between deaths from starvation and those caused by illness. Finally, this famine was exacerbated by the rising cost of living, which rendered food inaccessible for many due to artificial prices ‘resulting from hoarding, concealment or the existence of a black market’ (p. 169).

How did Franco’s government respond to this ‘geography of hunger’ plagued by diseases? The third part shows how famine was a double-edged sword: whilst the victors benefited from the management of hunger, the vanquished were forced to withdraw from political life, focusing on their own survival. This division was symbolised by white bread and black bread, the result of a failing food rationing system, which ‘was decisive for the social control that ensured the dictatorship’s survival’ (p. 195). This control was evident in the regime’s social policies through organisations controlled by the single party, FET y de las JONS, and inspired by European fascist regimes. In these institutions, ‘satisfying hunger became a weapon of re-education and domination’ (p. 218) over the children of the vanquished. But this control had a real effect due to the withdrawal of humanitarian aid, which was caused by the regime’s denial of the famine and its open hostility fuelled by fear of Allied influence.

Despite the circumstances, the starving who still had the strength to fight for their daily bread used diverse strategies. In the fourth part, Del Arco outlines these tactics to obtain food, from begging, rummaging through rubbish or fields or turning to prostitution, to breaking the law or even taking their own lives. Substitutes and food derivatives also emerged, a common feature of other famines, captured in the ‘recipes of hunger’. But the author shows how certain forms of resistance to the dictatorship were fostered, expressing discontent through jokes or graffiti, but also by maintaining networks of solidarity that extended as far as prisons and concentration camps.

The book concludes with some reflections that speak to our present situation, for although it has dealt with a fascist regime, famines persist today, often ‘influenced by the involvement –or inaction– of democratic countries’ (p. 342). The case of Gaza is paradigmatic. Del Arco also considers how the

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current ecological crisis may trigger new famines. But as many others have said before, the true danger of this crisis does not lie in natural disasters, but in how human societies choose to manage them. *La hambruna española* shows how famines can be caused and exacerbated by human beings when used as political and military tools. If history remains a ‘teacher of life’, this book also teaches us, through the Spanish famine, how to face our present and how to prepare for the future.

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