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Propaganda, Pacifism and Periodicals: Conflicted Anti-Fascism in Sylvia Townsend Warner's Spanish Civil War Writing

Jake O'Leary

Abstract

Sylvia Townsend Warner's Spanish Civil War writing reveals the complexity of her anti-fascism as it related to questions surrounding the role of propaganda and violence in resisting fascism. By analysing contributions Warner made to *Left Review*, this article argues that she both wrote propaganda in support of the Spanish Republic's war effort and critiqued the war (and its propaganda) for the human suffering it inflicted. It also suggests that, by critiquing the war in the form of lyric poetry, Warner was able to avoid the risk of rejection by a publication that strongly supported the Republic's war effort.

Keywords Spanish Civil War; *Left Review*; anti-fascism; periodicals; propaganda; pacifism

Sylvia Townsend Warner's opposition to fascism and her support for the Spanish Republic in its war of self-defence against General Franco's fascist rebels are well known. As well as undertaking fundraising activities and visiting Spain twice during the conflict alongside her partner, Valentine Ackland, Warner published reportage on the war in periodicals including *Time and Tide*, *The Countryman* and the anti-fascist monthly, *Left Review*. Referring to such pieces in a 1975 interview, Warner candidly admitted that:

I wrote a few articles about life in wartime Spain and got them in where I could simply as propaganda. And of course by that

time it was getting rather hard to get in any propaganda because the English authorities and respectables were clamping down on freelance journalists who had anything to say in favour of the Republic. I had a great deal to say ... I've never seen people who I admired more.¹

From this admission, we can see that Warner's articles on Spain embodied an anti-fascist politics inseparable from her support for the Republican war effort, which she was not hesitant to propagandise.

However, Warner also published a poem on Spain, 'Benicasim', in the March 1938 issue of *Left Review*. In this article, I will argue that 'Benicasim' critiques the propaganda of Warner's reportage and, by extension, the fighting of the war itself. This anti-war critique characterises what we might term Warner's conflicted anti-fascism. The word 'conflicted', here, is being used in two senses: first, to refer to the ambivalence of Warner's writing, with regard to pacifism and violent resistance to fascism; and, second, to emphasise the fact that urgent struggle with such moral and tactical questions was compelled by the conflict in Spain. Warner's engagement with these issues was not abstract but performed in relation to an actual war being fought against a fascist aggressor. Throughout this article, I will trace the development of this conflicted anti-fascism in Warner's periodical pieces and other writings, relating it to the broader context of women's anti-fascist activism in 1930s Britain. In addition, I will argue that Warner's use of lyric poetry may have enabled her to make a political critique in *Left Review* that ran counter to the periodical's editorial position of support for the Republican war effort.

In discussing the tension between politics and aesthetics in women's writing on the Spanish Civil War, Jane Dowson has suggested that:

one way of appreciating the imaginative aspect of the poetry – which distinguishes it from propaganda or autobiography – is to compare it with journalism and essays, such as Sylvia Townsend Warner's article 'Barcelona', written for *Left Review* after her first visit to help the Republican Medical Services.²

Expanding on this distinction between imaginative poetry and non-imaginative propaganda, Dowson notes that in Warner's poetry on Spain, 'typically, surface events such as blood, silence, horror and retreating refugees are merely recorded and the complex nature of

the struggle is left uninvestigated'.³ In other words, by imagining physical details and the suffering of others, Warner's poems avoid the focus on political divisions in the Republican zone that characterised much Spanish Civil War reportage. Perhaps the best-known example of this latter genre is George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), with its preoccupation with the Communist Party's suppression of anarchists and Trotskyists.

While Dowson's reading of Warner's poetry is instructive in this regard, it doesn't examine how Warner's poems critique the propaganda imperative as well as resisting it. In order to analyse this, I would like to take Dowson's advice and contrast the aforementioned article, 'Barcelona', with Warner's lyric poem, 'Benicasim', both of which were published in *Left Review*. The formal and political differences between these texts will indicate the complexity of Warner's relationship with propaganda, providing a foundation on which to discuss her conflicted anti-fascism.

'Barcelona' was published in the December 1936 issue of *Left Review*. It is structured by the juxtaposition of three temporalities: the July days of Franco's rising in 1936, Warner's visit to Barcelona in the September of that year, and the moment of the article's composition, after her return to Britain. Warner indicates these temporal leaps by switching between the past and present tense. However, the transition from Warner's description of the July days at the beginning of the article to her September visit is not effected by a qualified continuity of the past tense, but a switch to the present:

In the sturdily tranquil Barcelona which I saw two months later that tram was running as usual, distinguished, though, from trams of no past by the great wreath of flowers, renewed every morning, which it carried on its bows.

Wearing its proud wreath, it rumbles past the bullet-scarred walls, the trophies of flowers propped here and there against them to mark the death-site of some fighter in the July Days, the street-vendors' stalls which line the broad asphalt walk under the trees.⁴

The effect of this on the British reader of *Left Review*, reading the article in December, is to bring them imaginatively into the September street scene described by Warner, through the distance- and time-erasing properties of present-tense narration. If we understand propaganda to mean information designed to promote or increase

support for a political cause, then the function of this immediacy is propagandistic: the reader is encouraged to imagine herself in revolutionary Barcelona, joining the struggle of the city's working class to defend its newly won freedom. This effect, which the past tense could not have achieved, can also be seen in other propaganda pieces on Spain, such as Ralph Bates's article for the October 1936 issue of *Left Review*, 'Compañero Sagasta Burns a Church'.

The efficacy of this technique is bolstered by the date of the article's publication and the demographics of *Left Review's* readership. According to Peter Marks, the journal had 'a committed audience willing to engage actively with current social and cultural issues'.⁵ Marks has also noted that 'the December 1936 issue was devoted to the Popular Front, and included Sylvia Townsend Warner's article "Barcelona", signalling a central issue for *Left Review* over its remaining years: the Spanish Civil War and its ramifications.'⁶ The dedication of the entire December 1936 issue to Spain and the fight against fascism by Edgell Rickword, at this time the editor of *Left Review*, implies a belief that the war was winnable at that relatively early stage and that *Left Review's* politically committed readers could practically contribute to the victory. Rather than operating in isolation, Warner's propagandistic use of tenses would have worked within this historical context and in relation to a committed left-wing audience.

In 'Benicasim', published 15 months later, we find a very different representation of time. The poem's speaker describes a visit she makes to the Spanish coastal town, which hosted a hospital for wounded Republican soldiers. Temporality is strictly limited to the moment of this visit: rather than juxtaposing tenses, the speaker uses only the present tense, isolating the events of the poem from the past. We are not told, as we are in 'Barcelona', that the wounded fighters encountered by the speaker 'left their coffee-cups and newspapers to make history' in the heroic fighting of the July days.⁷ Rather, these fighters have no history, apart from that which is implied by their wounds. The reader is thus unable to ground the events of the poem within a linear narrative of revolutionary triumph, which resists any propaganda function that the wounded soldiers may have had.

However, 'Benicasim' does not only resist the propaganda function – it also critiques it. The poem's opening line, 'Here for a little we pause', makes ambiguous use of the first-person pronoun plural, in that it could refer either to the visit made by the speaker and unnamed companions or the soldiers' recuperation at the hospital.⁸ This invites

the reader to identify simultaneously with both the speaker and the soldiers. However, this initial identification begins to unravel from the second stanza:

For along the strand
in bleached cotton pyjamas, on rope-soled tread,
wander the risen-from-the-dead,
the wounded, the maimed, the halt.
Or they lay bare their hazarded flesh to the salt
air, the recaptured sun,
or bathe in the tideless sea, or sit fingering the sand.⁹

The initial identification with the soldiers gives way to a division, as the speaker begins to describe them from a distance. The possibility of the reader's imagining the soldiers' experience as her own is thus removed; rather, the reader is made to recognise the soldiers' otherness, a recognition that is heightened by the speaker's description of their wounds. It is interesting to compare Warner's technique here with W. H. Auden's 'Spain' (1937), perhaps the best-known propaganda poem of the conflict. In Auden's poem, identification works in the opposite direction: volunteer soldiers are described initially in the third person, before then being described in the first person to create an atmosphere of romantic camaraderie. The effect, once again, is to encourage the reader to imagine herself as a volunteer in Spain.

The othering of the soldiers in 'Benicasim' is also achieved by the verbs used by the speaker to describe their activities – 'wander', 'lay bare', 'bathe' and 'sit fingering'. These speak not of determination and action, but of aimlessness and passivity. Rather than the heroic fighters of the July days, these anonymous soldiers resemble the old-young men of Wilfred Owen's anti-propaganda First World War poem, 'Dulce et Decorum Est'. As a result, the experience of being a Republican volunteer is associated with pain and trauma, rather than revolutionary heroism.

The idea of a romantic revolutionary environment is also negated in 'Benicasim' by the speaker's descriptions of landscape. Beneath the Mediterranean beauty of the town, with its 'sun and salt and colour', 'palm and lemon-tree' and 'cactus and oleander', lies concealed horror: the oleander shrub is, in fact, poisonous, while in the poem's second stanza, the landscape described above is revealed to be a 'bright-painted landscape of Acheron', referencing the river of Greek mythology over which the souls of the dead had to pass.¹⁰ The embodiment by the

landscape of 'Benicasim' of danger and death negate the embodiment of revolutionary heroism by the cityscape of 'Barcelona', in which even the trams are heavy with emotive significance.

From this comparative reading, we can see that Warner's relationship with propaganda was complex. That this relationship related specifically to her writing on the Spanish Civil War and the anti-fascist fight against Franco raises further questions about the nature of Warner's anti-fascism and its relationship to war and violence. Warner's politics seem to have been characterised by ambivalence as to whether or not fascism should be violently resisted. This is demonstrated by the celebration in 'Barcelona' of the July days' fighters who 'took the kingdom of heaven by storm' by capturing a church from fascist troops, on the one hand, and by the anti-propagandist focus in 'Benicasim' on damaged and traumatised bodies, on the other hand.¹¹

This ambivalence can be identified in Warner's writings elsewhere. In the 5 September 1936 issue of the feminist magazine *Time and Tide*, published just three weeks before Warner arrived in Spain, we find a letter to the editor signed by Warner and eight other prominent writers (including the pacifist Aldous Huxley), in which the signatories assert that 'one of the most practical ways of co-operating in the creation of a peace-front is to take part in the International Peace Campaign'.¹² This anti-war stance is again in evidence in Warner's brief introduction to Ronald Duncan's pamphlet, *The Complete Pacifist*, published just one month after 'Barcelona' in January 1937. Here, Warner states that 'I have read this pamphlet with great interest. The question of non-violence is one which every social student must take into account, and I think this statement of it is extremely lucid and convincing.'¹³ While the very fact of Warner's agreeing to provide an introduction to a pacifist pamphlet may justify the assumption that she *was* a pacifist, it is notable that she stops short of identifying herself as such: she read the pamphlet with 'interest', not approval, and found it 'convincing' without saying that she agreed with it.

However, Warner was not consistent in expressing sympathy towards pacifism. In April 1939, the month in which the Spanish Civil War came to an end with Franco's victory, the periodical *Life and Letters To-day* published a review by Warner of Stephen Spender's and John Lehmann's anthology *Poems for Spain* (1939), which included 'Benicasim' and another of Warner's Spanish poems, 'Waiting at Cerbere'. In this review, Warner argues that 'the most striking thing about the poems in this collection is their freedom from sentimentality, from the jingo of war, and the equal jingo of peace'.¹⁴ Here, she

represents pacifism as aggressive, defined by an ideology as rigid and zealous as jingoism.

Warner's diaries of the Second World War years extend the ambivalence of her anti-fascism during the Spanish Civil War. In June 1940, for example, Warner wrote that 'war – this sort of war – is no way to attack fascism. And I am fretted to think how every day my chances of seeing other methods tried out are diminished.'¹⁵ The qualification of the first sentence – 'this sort of war' – perfectly embodies Warner's conflicted anti-fascism by revising what could be interpreted as a pacifist position, without fully committing to violent resistance – for Warner does not elaborate on what kind of war *could* defeat fascism.

From Warner's textual interventions in periodicals and elsewhere, it is difficult to identify a linear progression in her anti-fascism either towards or away from pacifism. Rather than developing smoothly and coherently, it seems to reflect the internal struggles and vociferous debates of many anti-fascist women in the 1930s. Quoting from the work of prominent women writers and activists including Rosamond Lehmann, Eleanor Rathbone and Vera Brittain, the historian Julie Gottlieb has illuminated how an 'ideological gulf' opened up in the second half of the 1930s between women who had previously campaigned together, based on a division between pacifists and those who supported rearmament in the face of the growing fascist threat.¹⁶ This, argues Gottlieb, created a situation in which:

there were endless shifting alliances, making shrapnel of once united political formations, and throwing political identities into confusion. This made the situation bewildering for those living through these years [...] Women no less than men struggled to decide their next moves from day to day and month to month in the late 1930s, creating both intellectual confusion and emotional dislocation.¹⁷

In other words, fascist aggression from 1935, the year in which Mussolini invaded Abyssinia, forced women writers and activists like Warner to wrestle with the moral, political and practical implications of both violent and non-violent resistance to fascism. The inauguration of this 'intellectual confusion' by wars and invasions launched by the fascist powers enables us to read Warner's anti-fascism as conflicted in two senses: first, in the sense that it was characterised by vacillation relating to war and pacifism; and, secondly, in the sense that it developed within the specific context of international conflict. Warner did not engage

with these problems abstractly, but in relation to actual war and its very real effects of damage and trauma on soldiers and civilians alike.

To conclude by returning to 'Benicasim', it is interesting to consider that Warner was able to publish such a poem in *Left Review*, a magazine that dedicated so much space to supporting the Spanish Republic's war effort. Although David Margolies has argued that the origins of *Left Review* in the ideologically diverse Popular Front precluded the imposition of a political or aesthetic line on the magazine's contributors,¹⁸ he has also suggested that under the journal's last editor, Randall Swingler, a more hard-line approach to the political function of literature was adopted. In this approach, literature was valued in proportion to the revolutionary nature of its content. To illustrate this shift, Margolies quotes from the editorial of the March 1938 issue, the same issue in which 'Benicasim' was published.¹⁹ This editorial standpoint would seem to condemn Warner's poem on the grounds that 'Benicasim' makes no obvious contribution to revolution, notwithstanding its focus on Spain and fascist violence. Rather, by critiquing violence and propaganda, it seems to take issue with the tactics advocated by the Communist Party, of which both Warner and Swingler were members.

One simple interpretation of Swingler's acceptance of 'Benicasim' could be that Warner's status as a fellow party member, her support for the Republic as both writer and activist and her previous writing on Spain meant that Swingler didn't attend too closely to the politics of the poem. However, it is also possible that the lyric poetic form allowed Warner to express the conflicted nature of her anti-fascism in a way that would have been difficult in a piece of reportage. Writing an article for *Left Review* about Benicasim may have required Warner to either criticise the war for the physical and psychological trauma it imposed on the soldiers, potentially risking editorial rejection, or to propagandise for the war effort despite the suffering of the wounded. Writing a lyric poem would have obviated the need for such a choice, because the anti-propaganda, anti-war politics of 'Benicasim' are embodied by the poem's focusing on what Dowson terms 'surface events', as well as by formal aspects such as its use of pronouns and selection of verbs. Rather than being represented in polemical argument, Warner's critique is implicit in the poem's form and structure.

'Benicasim', then, complicates assumptions about a simple relationship among Warner's anti-fascism, support for the Spanish Republic and willingness to propagandise for the Republican war effort. The poem's emphasis on the otherness of wounded Republican soldiers, which is defined by their experience of physical and psychological trauma,

enabled Warner to mount a powerful critique of war and propaganda. This reflected both the conflicted nature of her anti-fascism and broader debates among 1930s women anti-fascists as to how fascism should be resisted. The acceptance of ‘Benicasim’ by Swingler’s *Left Review* also suggests that Warner may have used lyric poetry to make a critique that would have been rejected had it been made in an article.

An interesting line of further enquiry may be to try to locate correspondence between Warner and Swingler relating to ‘Benicasim’, which seems to be the sole Spanish poem by Warner to be published in a periodical. Research on Warner’s other Spanish poems, including ‘Waiting at Cerbere’, ‘Journey to Barcelona’ and ‘Port Bou’, may also prove fruitful in relation to discovering why these poems didn’t appear in periodicals during the conflict. Finally, examining these poems in relation to ‘Barcelona’ and Warner’s other articles on Spain may shed further light on the interaction between Warner’s politics and aesthetics, and how this interaction both shaped and was shaped by the periodicals to which she contributed.

Notes

- 1 Val Warner and Michael Schmidt, ‘Sylvia Townsend Warner in Conversation’, *PN Review* 8 (1981), p. 35.
- 2 Jane Dowson, ‘Women Poets and the Political Voice’, in Maroula Joannou (ed.), *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 49.
- 3 Dowson, ‘Women Poets and the Political Voice’, p. 50.
- 4 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *With the Hunted: Selected Writings*, ed. Peter Tolhurst (Norwich: Black Dog Books, 2012), p. 137.
- 5 Peter Marks, ‘Art and Politics in the 1930s: *The European Quarterly* (1934–5), *Left Review* (1934–8), and *Poetry and the People* (1938–40)’, in Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (eds.), *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, three vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009–13), vol. 1, p. 636.
- 6 Marks, ‘Art and Politics in the 1930s’, p. 638.
- 7 Warner, *With the Hunted*, p. 137.
- 8 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Claire Harman (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2008), p. 256.
- 9 Warner, *New Collected Poems*, p. 256.
- 10 Warner, *New Collected Poems*, p. 256.
- 11 Warner, *With the Hunted*, p. 137.
- 12 Aldous Huxley et al., ‘International Peace Campaign’, *Time and Tide* 17 (1936), p. 1219.
- 13 Ronald Duncan, *The Complete Pacifist* (London: Boriswood, 1937), p. 3.
- 14 Sylvia Townsend Warner, ‘Spain’, *Life and Letters To-day* 21 (1939), p. 102.
- 15 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 105.
- 16 Julie Gottlieb, “Broken Friendships and Vanished Loyalties”: Gender, Collective (In)Security and Anti-Fascism in Britain in the 1930s’, *Politics, Religion and Ideology* 13 (2012), p. 214.
- 17 Gottlieb, “Broken Friendships and Vanished Loyalties”, p. 216.
- 18 David Margolies (ed.), *Writing the Revolution: Cultural Criticism from ‘Left Review’* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), pp. 7–8.
- 19 Margolies (ed.), *Writing the Revolution*, pp. 16–17.

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