



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 06, Issue 05, 2017, 01-07

Article Received: 28-03-2017

Accepted: 11-04-2017

Available Online: 17-04-2017

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18533/journal.v6i4.1163>

Ernest Hemingway and His Growth as a Political Activist in the 1930s

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ABSTRACT

Ernest Hemingway was one of the United States' most famous authors of the twentieth century. Known primarily for his fiction, Hemingway was also a journalist and a political commentator. Although he was reluctant in his early years to share his political beliefs with a wide audience, as he grew older and the political events of the 1930s grew more ominous, Hemingway went to Spain to cover the Spanish Civil War as a journalist. Although he began with a more neutral approach to the fighting in Spain, as the war wore on, Hemingway openly became a strong supporter of the Republican cause. He then began to work as a political commentator for the magazine *Ken*, openly espousing an antifascist view, clearly breaking with his previously neutral approach to world affairs, continuing this position with the publication of his world-famous novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. By the 1940s Hemingway was internationally known and his political beliefs were an integral part of who he was.

Keywords: Cuba, Hemingway, Key West, Spain.

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The 1930s was an extremely important decade in Ernest Hemingway's life. As he began to receive acclaim for his writing, and he became an international celebrity, he also started his political involvement during the Spanish Civil War. That decade saw the end of his marriage to his second wife, Pauline, and the beginning of his relationship with Martha Gellhorn. As the country and the world weathered the Great Depression and the march toward World War II, Hemingway came into his own as a writer, while his second marriage deteriorated. Although up to this time, he was commonly seen as a writer with little or no interest in politics, a notion which Hemingway himself helped to perpetuate publicly. In reality, he was being drawn deeper into international events that would separate him from his family and help launch an important growth spurt in his writing career. The Spanish Civil War became an important ingredient in Hemingway's life during this period and a deeper understanding of him during this era will give important insights into what shaped him later in life. After returning from Spain, Hemingway relocated to Cuba, living there until the early 1960s when he was forced to surrender his farm, Finca Vigía, to the revolutionary Cuban government of Fidel Castro.

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Hemingway's commentary on the war in the antifascist journal *Ken* demonstrated this important change in his views. In his articles for the magazine, he openly referred to members of the United States' State Department as fascists and complained bitterly about the failure of the major powers, especially the British and the United States, to support the cause of the Spanish Republic. Other authors, including Adam Hochschild, Kenneth Lynn, Nicholas Reynolds, Jerome Tuccille, and Michael Reynolds have written about Hemingway in this period, but they have not discussed his writings about antifascism in the magazine *Ken*. These articles clearly show Hemingway's transition to being an antifascist. He was determined to fight against fascist ideology and he realized the threat that it posed to the United States and the other democratic powers. These articles, along with Hemingway's work on the film *The Spanish Earth* clearly demonstrated his transformation from a neutral observer to being a political activist.

Hemingway and his first wife, Hadley Richardson moved to Paris shortly after their wedding in 1922. Hemingway worked as a journalist, while he sought to establish himself as a writer. During his time in Paris he met Pauline Pfeiffer, who was a fashion editor for *Vogue* magazine. In 1925, Hadley learned of the affair and demanded a divorce – Hemingway then married Pauline in Paris in 1927. The Hemingways returned to the United States in 1928, since Pauline was pregnant and they wanted the child to be born in the United States. Initially, they passed through Key West from Cuba on their way to Kansas City, where she planned to have the baby. While Hemingway originally came to Key West to fish and relax, it did not work out as he imagined, since the island will instead be a long-term residence for him. For Hemingway, over time Key West became less of a place of work and more one of entertainment largely because he had invited so many people to visit him there. With the help of Pauline's family wealth, the Hemingways were living well, indeed far more extravagantly than when Ernest was a struggling writer in Paris. Eventually, though, he tired of the domestic routine in Key West and he started to look for new adventures. (Reynolds, 2011, p.39)

The events in Spain would start to make international news in the mid-1930s, drawing Hemingway away from his sedate life in the Caribbean and thrusting him into a war zone. His differences with Pauline worsened at this time and eventually led to his affair and subsequent marriage to the journalist Martha Gellhorn. Yet as Hemingway gained fame, others started to tell him what he should be writing and they often reacted negatively if he failed them. This created a conflict with the highly independent man who wanted the freedom to write about whatever he chose. Up to this point, Hemingway had largely kept his political views separate from his writing. That would start to change in short order, however, as he began to feel more confident about expressing his sentiments, capitalizing on his fame as a writer.

The fall of 1936 brought the arrival of American volunteer troops in Spain to support the army of the Spanish Republic and with them a number of American journalists. Hemingway was not paying much attention to the war unfolding 3,000 miles away until a chance meeting in December 1936 at Sloppy Joe's bar in Key West, which would turn the next page in his career. There he met the writer Martha Gellhorn and became infatuated with her almost immediately. As his marriage to Pauline had been on the rocks for several years, the arrival of a potential successor deeply interested Hemingway. Martha was already focused on the events going on in Spain and she was a loyal supporter of the Republican cause. She had resolved to go to Spain to cover the war as a journalist. Hemingway, who was deeply infatuated with Martha, could get well paid for working for the North American News Alliance and reporting the war from Spain. He would earn between 500 and 1000 dollars per story, a considerable sum in the middle of the Depression. (Reynolds, 2011, pp. 236-40)

In a letter to Pauline's parents explaining his reasons for going to Spain, Hemingway indicated that his goal was to provide antiwar journalism that would keep the United States out of the European war to follow. He wrote, "I hate to go away, but you can't preserve your happiness by trying to take care of it or putting it away in moth balls and for a long time both me and my conscience both have known I had to go to Spain . . . The Reds may be as bad as they say but they are the people of the country verses the absentee landlords, the moors, the Italians and the Germans." He continued, "I know the Whites are rotten because I know them very well and I would like to have a look at the others to see how it lines up

on the basis of humanity . . . I would like to write anti-war correspondence that would help keep us out of it when it comes.” (Baker, 1981, pp. 457-58)

Such views clearly demonstrated that Hemingway was not, in fact, the a political writer that he claimed to be publicly, but was indeed someone who did have clear opinions on the political issues which surrounded the Spanish Civil War, the most important military event of the 1930s. Indeed, Hemingway was concerned that his political opinions might get him barred from the country. “Hope to get back in May. You have to get out of the country to write your uncensored stuff and, if they don’t like it, sometimes you can’t get back in,” he wrote to Pauline’s parents. Prior to departing in February 1937, Hemingway wrote to fellow writer Harry Sylvester regarding his views on the events in Spain. “The Spanish war is a bad war Harry, and nobody is right. All I care about is human beings and alleviating their suffering which is why I back ambulances and hospitals.” (Baker, 1981, pp. 456-58)

As he sailed to Europe in February of 1937, Hemingway gave an interview regarding his views on the war in Spain. He wanted to show Americans what “this modern, new style war looks like, so that they can see it and hate it as any man who has ever seen it hates it . . . now is the time to do it. Now before the next war starts.” He continued, “I wouldn’t want to be a war correspondent when we get into the next war, but I’m glad of the chance to be one now, because the war correspondent now who is true to his job is really an antiwar correspondent for the home folks.” Hemingway felt that “[e]verybody is trying to push us into the next war, the new style of war where there is no such thing as a non-combatant, where everybody who lives across a line on the map is a target. In many ways, Hemingway was able to see in 1937 what many did not yet realize, namely that the Spanish Civil War was a dress rehearsal for World War II. “The idea is,” Hemingway continued, “this next war isn’t going to be a picnic for anybody. There will be airplanes to lay eggs all over everybody and the war is going to come right smack into everybody’s home and drip blood all over the carpets.” He argued, “[t]hat’s what happening with this ‘little world war’ in Spain, and what I want to do is get the picture and cable it back home so that people will say ‘My God, that’s what going to happen to me if we let Europe get us into the next war.’” (Hemingway Collection, Box 15 Folder 12)

Hemingway and Gellhorn met in Madrid after traveling there separately. Their similar personalities were often a point of friction, as Hemingway had traditionally favored women who were less worldly than he was and were willing to be subordinate to him. Gellhorn, on the other hand, was a professional writer and very self-sufficient. She could survive on her own and flourish without Hemingway’s guidance. Like Hemingway and Gellhorn, most of the journalists were sympathetic to the Republican cause, viewing the actions of Hitler and Mussolini as a preparation for a later, greater war in Europe. The controversial aspect for many, however, was the Soviet support for the Spanish Republic, which was often seen as an attempt to export its revolution outside the borders of the Soviet Union. (Reynolds, 2011, pp. 244-46)

In Spain, Hemingway walked the battlefields and got a close view of the fighting and the dead. It had been almost twenty years since he had such direct contact with war – dating back to his experiences on the Italian front in World War I. Gellhorn traveled and worked with Hemingway much of the time. While she was an accomplished writer, she was not necessarily a true journalist. Her interests focused more on the wounded soldiers and the women rather than the war itself. Hemingway inevitably felt far from the outside world while he was in Spain and as he wrote to Pauline’s mother in August 1937 “[a]fter the first two weeks in Madrid had an impersonal feeling of haveing [sic] now no wife, no children, no boat, nothing. The only way to function.” (Baker, 1981, p. 460)

That May, Hemingway returned to Key West. An article for the North American News Alliance in May of 1937 reported that on his return from Europe, Hemingway said, “I consider ultimate victory of the government party now certain and felt so ever since the crushing defeat of the Italian attack at Brihuega put a new face on the situation.” He felt that the fundamental strength of the government lay in the sympathy of the mass of the Spanish people. The power of the government lay in its work in creating a large and well-trained army which will enter the field, while the role of the international brigades was coming to an end. Always willing to put himself in danger, Hemingway had several close calls while he

was in Madrid, including having the room next to his at the hotel destroyed by a bomb. Yet, these occurrences did not dampen his enthusiasm for returning to Madrid. (Hemingway Collection, Box 15 Folder 12)

The film about the war that Hemingway had helped produce, *The Spanish Earth*, directed by Jorvis Ivens, was nearing completion. He had promised to create the narration to match the scenes, replacing one by Orson Wells, which was deemed to be too theatrical. The film would later be shown to audiences to gain financial support from Americans for the Spanish Republican cause. Hemingway had donated \$4000 to the production costs for the film. He had also accompanied the filming crew as they as they filmed many of the battle scenes near Madrid as well as air raids and the care of wounded soldiers. All the while, Hemingway, Gellhorn and many of the other journalists covering the war lived near to the fighting in downtown Madrid. (Hochschild, 2016, p.165; Reynolds, 2011, p. 255)

Hemingway gave his first political speech at Carnegie Hall in June 1937 following a screening of a portion of *The Spanish Earth*. He condemned fascism and noted that no true writer could live within the small limits of freedom that existed in that political system. He argued that a neutral stance on the war was no longer possible, one had to take sides to ensure the continuation of freedom. This statement publicly committed him to antifascism and in many ways began Hemingway's public political life. No longer could he claim to the disinterested novelist who just happened to go to Spain – it was now clear that Hemingway had deep political views, no matter how hard he had previously struggled to hide them. (Reynolds, 2011, pp. 251-53)

The Spanish Earth was shown again on July eighth at the White House. While the U.S. remained neutral in the war, both President Franklin Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor were supporters of the film. Hemingway commented to Pauline's mother in August 1937, "[i]t was damned nice of the Roosevelts to have us there and to see the picture and appreciate it . . . Martha Gellhorn, the girl who fixed it up for Jorvis Ivens and I to go there, ate three sandwiches in the Newark Airport before we flew to Washington. We thought she was crazy at the time but she said the food was always un-eatable and everybody ate before they went there to dinner. She has stayed there a lot. Me, I won't be staying there anymore." (Baker, 1981, p. 461)

Following the White House showing, Hemingway and Ivens flew to California for more benefit galas that eventually raised money to buy twenty ambulances for the Republican cause. Yet, even with the support of foreign volunteers, however, the losses mounted in Spain in the summer of 1937, as optimism in the Loyalist cause began to fade and reality set in. The forces of Franco, aided by Hitler and Mussolini, were much better supplied than those of the Republic, which was suffering under an arms embargo from the west and the presentation of the film at the White House did nothing to change that. (Hochschild, 2016, p. 239)

By August of 1937, Hemingway was back in New York with Martha Gellhorn as the two planned to return to Spain. He felt that a crisis was due in the next two months; he said in an interview, "It all goes back to Italy . . . Italy needs a victory. More than that, it needs to win quickly because of the difficult state of its own finances. It can't keep pouring money it hasn't got into a bottomless bag." He continued, "Italy keeps prodding Franco and Franco will have to do what he must before October is out. After that, the rains come down, snow on the mountains, rains on the plains, and the roads melt into a pulp." Hemingway wondered what would happen to the people who remained in Madrid. After traveling across the Atlantic separately for the sake of propriety, Hemingway and Gellhorn arrived in France and went onward to Spain. They stopped in Valencia before going on to Madrid and there they spoke to members of the brigades that fought at the battles in Quinto and Belchite. Ultimately, they arrived at the Hotel Florida in Madrid, where they were well stocked with provisions but with little news to report. (Reynolds, 2011, pp. 253-60; Hemingway Collection, Box 15 Folder 11)

That December, Pauline arrived in Europe anxious to see her husband, as Martha Gellhorn traveled back to the United States. Pauline was angry and hurt about Hemingway's relationship with Martha. Finally,

Hemingway left Spain and arrived in Paris – Pauline was there waiting there for him and she exploded. Pauline threatened to throw herself off of the hotel balcony. They returned together, circumventing New York, instead traveling through the Bahamas and Cuba on their way back to Key West. This was done primarily to avoid encountering journalists’ questions if they traveled through New York City, which was the typical route. The situation with Pauline and Martha was, in Hemingway’s words, a “gigantic jam.” He arrived home in Key West in January 1938, where he had been for less than three weeks during the past year. He wrote to his first wife, Hadley, with whom he maintained a good relationship after their divorce, shortly after he returned. “Just got here day before yesterday and am nine months behind in correspondence business and general pile up. Am also very homesick for Spain.” (Reynolds, 2011, pp. 263-64; Moorehead, 2003, p. 141; Baker, 1981, p. 462)

Back in Key West, it was hard for Hemingway to readjust to traditional domestic life with his wife and children. He had strong feelings for Martha and his mind was occupied with the war in the Spain that was going poorly for the loyalists. At the same time, Gellhorn was on a national speaking tour to encourage Americans to support the Spanish Republic. She praised the young men who decided to fight for the Republican cause highlighting the ideas of dignity and morality coming from people who knew who they were. She warned about worse things to come, if the Republicans were to lose their struggle to Franco’s forces. She met Hemingway’s mother at one engagement, and his mother later wrote to him regarding the talk, mentioning that she had seen Gellhorn. (Moorehead, 2003, p. 141; Reynolds, 2011, pp. 265-56)

By March of 1938, Hemingway and Gellhorn returned to Paris on their way to Spain. Life in Key West was tense and Hemingway was anxious to get back to war, back to Martha, and away from the unpleasantness of life at home. He wrote a piece for *Ken* magazine in April 1938 on his views on the war. “It has been going on now, in Spain, all day and all night long for over a year and a half. War is not a word that frightens people any longer. They are getting used to it now.” He continued, explaining the importance of the battle. “The men who are defending [the] country against the Moors, the Italians and Germans, die in the same way. They die in as strange ways in as ugly ways as do the invaders. But they die knowing why they die; they die fighting for you [emphasis original] now; knowing that unless they beat the fascists now you [emphasis original] will have to fight them later.” (Hemingway, 21 April 1938, p. 68)

Hemingway continued his article, making a case for American intervention in Spain. “Many of them came a long way to die in Spain and none of them . . . got more than 50 [cents] a day. They, the men of the International Brigades, were not soldiers of fortune or adventurers. They were just very clear thinkers. No one sent them. They came to Spain to fight fascism because they saw, long before the diplomats, how dangerous it was.” His greatest criticism was saved for the governments of Britain, France, and the United States for their failure to aid the Spanish Republic. He felt that their failure to allow the Spanish Republic to be able to buy weapons helped to promote the growth of fascism in Europe. He wrote “If the democratic nations allow Spain to be over-run by the fascists through their refusal to allow the Spanish legal government to buy and import arms to combat a military insurrection and fascist invasion, then they will deserve whatever fate that brings them.” He continued, “[m]eantime, all day and all night it goes on. The resistance of the Republican government in Spain against the first combined fascist invasion is the great holding attack to save what we call civilization.” (Ibid., 68)

In June 1938, Hemingway’s commentary on the Spanish Civil War appeared in the magazine *Ken*. He wrote, “If this magazine is to bring any sort of insider’s view . . . it must keep returning to a consideration of the Spanish war even though it bores you. Meantime, the correspondent wishes to congratulate the fascists in the U.S. State Department . . . There will be a war in Spain a year from now because men are fighting there who will die rather than surrender their country to the Italians and the Germans.” That July, Hemingway appealed to President Roosevelt through the pages of *Ken*, indicating that Roosevelt has seen “what fascist promises are worth and he has no commitments beyond his own ambition. Unlike Mr. Chamberlin, he has the people behind him. He knows what fascism means and he knows where America’s interests lie.” (Hemingway, 16 June 1938, p. 36; Hemingway, 14 July 1938, p. 23)

After a family hunting trip to Wyoming in the summer of 1938, Hemingway returned to Paris in August for a reunion with Gellhorn. That September, Hemingway wrote a strongly-worded opinion piece for *Ken* in which he argued that “all events now show [members of the State Department] supplied their President with false information on the status and conduct of [the] civil war in Spain. If a diplomat or permanent employee of the State Department lies to the public it may be necessary and a question of policy. But if he lies to the president and furnishes him with false information, when true information is available, he is either a fool or a knave.” Hemingway clearly advanced the view that there was a purposeful deception on behalf of the U.S. State Department which kept the United States from participating in the war, or at least ending its arms embargo of the Republic. He wrote, “certain career men in the U.S. State Department informed the President that the war in Spain would be over in a month . . . They informed him . . . that it was useless to allow the Spanish Republic to buy arms to defend itself because those arms would only fall into the hand of Franco.” (Hemingway, 8 September 1938, pp. 17-18)

He further referred to State Department officials as fascist, arguing, “The fascist intervention in the State Department took the President out of the play as any interference ever blocked out a defensive halfback. He never had a chance to act against the lying . . . is the President to be lied to this October when there will be heavy fighting, or this winter, or next spring? These career men are supposed to work for us, the American people. They are supposed to tell the truth to their boss . . . If they do not give the truth to him they should be fired. It is still not too late to lift the arms embargo and allow the Spanish legal government to buy arms to defend itself against German and Italian invasion.” The International Brigades were withdrawn from the fighting in September, and by November 24, 1938 Hemingway was traveling back to the United States. (*Ibid.*, 18; Tuccille, 2011, p. 162)

Although he was physically home in Key West, Hemingway’s mind was still very much back in Spain. By the late 1930s, the war had taken on great significance to him, and he was becoming more deeply interested in politics than he ever was before. In a letter to his mother-in-law in February 1939, which was full of family news, including his son Patrick’s confirmation, Hemingway drifted into a discussion of the war. “The Italians moved in new troops, artillery and planes while the Spanish government sent away all their foreign volunteers and then had the French border closed against their bringing in artillery and munitions by Chamberlain and Daladier.” He continued discussing the war, especially the propaganda campaign “I was not in Guernica”. But I was in Mora del Ebro, Tortosa, Reus, Tarragona, Saguto and many other towns where Franco did exactly what he denies having [sic] done in Guernica . . . There is only one thing to do when you have a war and that is win it. When you have been betrayed and sold out a dozen different ways and have lost you shouldn’t object to being lied about in addition.” (Baker, 1981, p. 476)

He went on to describe in detail the events that had recently occurred in Spain. “The French frontier has been closed to incoming stuff since last May. They opened up and let a little through when it was too late in January . . . It will take Franco from six to eight weeks to organize a large-scale offensive against either Madrid or Valencia. If he is smart he will try Valencia. If he takes Valencia central Spain is doomed . . . [it] is the richest part of Spain and feeds Madrid . . . Food has been short for two years all through central Spain.” Another issue for Hemingway was that many of his friends remained in Madrid and he was concerned about their welfare. (Baker, 1981, p. 477)

Hemingway further expressed his feelings on war in a letter from Key West written to Ivan Kashkin in March 1939. “We know war is bad. Yet sometimes, it is necessary to fight. But still war is bad and any who says it is not is a liar. But it is very complicated to write about it truly . . . for me not to understand fear in others or deny its existence would be bad writing.” He went on to argue that, “[t]he only thing about a war, once it has started is to win it—and that is what we did not do.” Here Hemingway clearly sided with the Republican cause, again belying his previous statement that he was not interested in taking sides. Indeed, while he may have started his coverage of the war from a more objective stance, by 1939 he felt that his side had lost the war – certainly an indication of Hemingway’s growing interest in politics. (Baker, 1981, p. 480)

Ultimately, Hemingway was unable to convince the British or American governments to join the war against fascism in Spain. The ultimate victory of the anti-Republican forces led to the growth of fascism in Europe and paved the way for World War II. The suspicion of Communism was so deep in the west, that any action which supported the Soviet Union, which was the primary ally of the Spanish loyalists, was unthinkable. The predictions of Hemingway and other antifascists ultimately came true by the fall of 1939. The failure to take Hitler and Mussolini seriously permitted the growth of their power across Europe and North Africa. Only the huge expenditure of money and manpower in World War II finally led to the end of fascism.

When Hemingway left Key West for Cuba in the spring of 1939, Gellhorn joined him, and the relationship with Pauline was effectively over. By the end of 1939, Hemingway's second marriage officially ended, and the next year he embarked on his third. Upon his final return from Spain, Hemingway started to write his novel of the Spanish Civil War – *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. He decided to stay in Cuba, eventually buying an estate there, Finca Vigia, on the outskirts of Havana, while giving the home in Key West to Pauline. In many ways, Hemingway's experiences in Spain, which led to the writing of arguably his most important novel, made his career as a writer. He was now at the height of his powers, and much of his later reputation depended on his success from *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Now that Hemingway had taken the plunge into politics, he could now reveal his political sentiments more openly than he felt comfortable doing before. This helped him produce a more authentic work in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. By leaving the country, both in his decision to go to Spain and then to settle in Cuba, Hemingway felt freer to write his true feelings and in doing so, accurately demonstrate his political beliefs. Hemingway remained at Finca Vigia until the early 1960s, when the revolutionary government of Fidel Castro forced him to surrender his property there. He reluctantly returned to the United States, living in Ketchum, Idaho until his suicide in 1961.

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