THEY WANTED A REVOLUTION:
TERESA PÀMIES REVISITS COMMUNIST
ACTIONS IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR
AND BEYOND

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been an increasing production of narratives that reassess various aspects of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath. While many deal with prisons, work camps, and other cases of the mistreatment and suffering of the "vencidos," some examine actions by factions on the Republican side, including Ignacio Martínez de Pisón's Enterrar a los muertos, which investigates the assassination of author José Robles by Communist Party forces. Prior to all this activity, Catalan author and activist Teresa Pàmies had already contributed her own very personal and, at the same time, more general re-examination of the Communist Party's actions during the war and after in Els anys de lluita (2003), which is formulated as a letter to her granddaughter. In this text, we see her analyze mistakes and attempt to explain political decisions and positions. Her situation is representative of many Spanish intellectuals of her generation who, after an early alliance with the Communists, eventually had to come to terms with the reality of Stalinism, the Prague Spring, and the errors that were made during the Civil War. Pàmies and her father, Tomàs, have always been associated with revolution and commitment to workers' movements. From her early days as a leader in the Catalan Communist youth organization during the Civil War and throughout her exile, Teresa was a champion of the Communist Party. This essay explores how this text represents a significant change in the rhetoric typically found in her memoirs and other accounts of the war and her exile. With this volume, Pàmies makes a significant contribution to the necessary revision of a part of Spanish and Catalan history.

"Ara que han passat tants anys, cal matisar i analitzar la guerra des d'una perspectiva més acurada"
(Pàmies qtd. in Gaillard)

In recent years, there has been a striking increase in the production of narratives that reassess various aspects of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath. While many deal with prisons, work camps, and other cases of the mistreatment and suffering of the "vencidos," some examine actions by factions on the Republican side, including Ignacio Martínez de Pisón's Enterrar a los muertos, which investigates the assassination of author José Robles, who acted as a Russian interpreter, by Communist
Party forces. Prior to all this activity, however, Catalan author and activist Teresa Pàmies had already contributed her own very personal and, at the same time, more general re-examination of the Communist Party’s actions during the war and after in *Els anys de lluita: Carta a la nèct sobre el comunisme* (2001), which is part of the Columna series “Carta a...” In this text, Pàmies directs her letter to her granddaughter, analyzing mistakes and attempting to explain past political decisions and positions. Pàmies and her father, Tomàs, have always been associated with revolution and a commitment to workers’ movements. From her early days as a leader in the JSUC (the Catalan Communist youth organization) during the Civil War and throughout her exile, Teresa was a champion of the party. Events of the 1960s and 70s forced her to examine that unconditional loyalty, as they did so many Spanish intellectuals and activists of her generation; after an alliance with the communists dating from their youth, they eventually had to find some way to come to terms with the reality of Stalinism, the Prague Spring, and the errors that were made during the Civil War.

I will explore to what degree *Els anys de lluita* represents a significant change in the position typically found in Pàmies’s memoirs and other accounts of her communist affiliation during the war and her exile. Although now able to critique communism, Pàmies continues condemning capitalism, and predicting serious consequences for the future, if it is the only alternative. The author carefully crafts this apologia, framing her comments in very personal appeals to her granddaughter that temper the admissions of errors and shortcomings of the political system that has been central to her existence. The text can clearly be situated within the vein of reexamination of events connected to the war and the years after that has become so common in late Spain. Such activity is not confined to the realm of the textual, but also includes legal battles and demonstrations surrounding the movement of the Salamanca Archives to Catalonia, the work of the Asociación por la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (articles about their uncovering the remains of Civil War victims in different parts of the country appear with some frequency in *El País*), and the Consejo de Ministros’s approval of the Ley de Memoria Histórica in summer of last year. Indeed, this proposed legislation has provoked much debate, including the circulation of a digital petition demanding a law that goes much further

1 It is worth noting that outsiders are observing and commenting on this activity as well. A New York Times piece on an exhibit about journalists’ coverage of the Spanish Civil War sums up the events this way: “In recent years Spain has begun to shake off the collective amnesia that had gripped it since Franco’s death... A project to locate and dig up the hundreds of mass graves left by the firing squads of Franco rule is actively under way. Parliament is locked in a contentious debate over legislation to recognize the suffering of the victims” (4). British journalist Giles Tremlett’s recently released *Ghosts of Spain: Travels through Spain and its Silent Past* uses the story of one such unmarked grave as its point of departure to explore treatment of the past in contemporary culture.

Another contribution of sorts to Pàmies’s own reassessment is *Estem en guerra: Escrits 1936-39*, which appeared more recently, in 2004. This collection of articles from her early years in their original form features a preface in which she reflects on some of the pieces’ limitations, but recognizes their merit as accurate articulations of wartime Communist Party ideology. The author feels that publishing this collection without making any changes will help us to understand why those with a communist affiliation did what they did; she believes that it would not be “honest” to alter anything to reflect her present views. Her comments from an interview about the work echo what we will see in *Els anys de lluita*: “‘Llibres com aquest’ —afegir—‘s’ajuden a desmitificar el bòndol republicà i a no demonitzar els altres” (qtd. in Gaillard). She appears to be aiming at a deeper, more nonpartisan understanding of events than has usually been the case. Although some thirty years will have to pass between events and the appearance of these two texts, they are the natural development of Pàmies’s doubts and questioning of the party line that we see starting with the Prague spring and the anguish that she records in *Testament a Praga* (1971), a text that includes her father’s memoirs along with Teresa’s reflections.

In addition to this shared content — *Els anys de lluita* can be seen as an outgrowth of the examination of the party and its actions begun in *Testament*— we find connections between the forms of these two narratives. Teresa establishes a link with her father in the opening dedication of *Els anys de lluita*: “Al record del meu pare que m’orientà pel camí del comunisme,” and uses some of the same tactics that Tomàs employs in the account of his life in *Testament*, which focuses on his political formation. Although not in letter form, Tomàs’s memoirs have his children as an implied audience, with occasional statements to this effect: “I ara m’adreço directament a vosaltres, fills, i també als nèus que esdevindran homes i tindran necessitat de l’experiència de la meva generació” (133). Teresa includes a similar declaration in *Els anys de lluita*: “En realitat t’escric aquesta carta sobre les meves batalles perdudes i guanyades, pensant en la teva generació, que un dia tindrà també les seves batalles ben diferents a les meves, ni més glorieuses ni més dramàtiques però, en tot cas, aquesta carta escrita a la meva nèta, que ets tu, pot orientar-la i allicinar-la” (39). Both authors take advantage of certain benefits offered by the epistolary mode, described by Carme Riera in the following way: “La carta permet que quien escribe cuente únicamente lo que quiere contar y pase por alto o no aluda aquellos aspectos que no le interesan escamoteando quizá datos
que no le dejarían bien parado, sin que nadie pudiera ponerle peros o interrumpirle" (18). Due to the presence of his daughter's voice in Testament a Praga, however, Tomàs is not in fact able to take full advantage of this control. She has "the last word," taking him to task on a number of points in her closing. In contrast, Teresa's sections of the text are letters directed to her father, who is no longer able to read or respond to them—or, in Riera's words, "ponerle peros o interrumpirle."

Despite a certain level of control, Pàmies reveals a great deal of personal information in Els anys de lluita and in several other narratives where she avails herself of the letter writing convention, including Cartes al fill recluta (1984). Here, she gives advice to her son, who is doing his compulsory military service in Euskadi. The majority of the text is dedicated, however, to her reactions to what she learns of the attack on Parliament and attempted coup in February of 1981, which is fashioned into installments of a letter to him. Just as in Testament, personal reflections are necessarily shaped by political events of the immediate past. Once again, in an epistle directed to a family member we are privy to many intimate details that are inevitably intertwined with the political points foremost in the author's mind. For readers, the personal connections act to make the political content less potentially controversial, and more readily acceptable. As Teresa describes that night, not knowing what might happen to her husband (a Communist representative) or her son, the offspring of known communists under military orders, we share her concern and suffering.

Similarly, in Els anys de lluita, from the opening of this letter to her granddaughter, Aliona, Pàmies establishes a tone of complicity that she will reiterate throughout the text. The author broadens her acknowledged audience to include all seven of her grandchildren, whom she names, at the end: “Penso en los altres nèts: Sergi, Pere, Alex, Urko, Joan i Natàlia i en la generació que creixerà en un planeta amenaVat d’extermini total pel sistema capitalista enollit de codiciça” (84). The focus, however, remains on Aliona, not only because she was the first grandchild, or as Teresa puts it: "la primera que em converdi en avia" (9), but also because she was born to her Spanish father and Russian mother in the Soviet Union, and thus is a communist by accident of birth. Pàmies contrasts this situation with her own conscious choosing of a party affiliation, which has required all members of the family to make certain sacrifices. After enumerating some of these she reflects: "Una família complicada, la nostra, xiqueta, perquè jo vaig assumir el comunisme, que no és sols una ideologia sinó una manera de viure" (10). By acknowledging these hardships, and the impossibility of avoiding them, from the start, the author cuts off possible objections about the familial problems caused by communism that could be used to weaken her position.

The occasional appeals to her granddaughter for patience and her grandnotherly requests that Aliona bear with her constitute another skillful rhetorical device in Els anys de lluita, as they serve to soften what is being said, and allow the author to capitalize on the human element, making her observations more palatable than if they were part of a straightforward essay. As readers, we grant Pàmies the leeway for which she is appealing to her granddaughter. Her open expression of doubt about whether Aliona will actually read "aquesta carta tan llarga i un pel pamfletària" (84) further cultivates reader sympathy; we see the text as part of the family history, rather than just a political tract.

Throughout the narrative, Pàmies sets up a capitalism-communism dichotomy that, through her critique of capitalism, allows communism to recuperate some points in its favor. Much of Pàmies's criticism of capitalism appears in a description of how it has changed the Czech Republic for the worse. Presented with the evidence in letters from friends and newspaper clippings, the reader is compelled to recognize that the absence of communism has had numerous negative consequences, which the author sums up in this way: "...i guaixiren de les llibertats que els negava el comunisme, no soles la llibertat d’expresió i reuníon sinó la llibertat d’espacular, explotar el pròxim, estafar i prostituir-se..." (64). Pàmies continues in a similar vein, pointing to a positive product of the communist system: the number of well-prepared former communist officials who have served ably in office in the post-communist era. She offers concrete examples of individuals from former communist states who were originally "trained" in the party and then successfully returned to public service, indicating that the experience prepared them well.

A concession that does represent a significant change in Pàmies' previous position is a sort of rehabilitation of Andreu Nin and his fellow members of the POUM (Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification). For the first time, Pàmies denies any link between Nin or this group and Trotsky, even going so far as to recognize that "[e]ls dos dirigents marxistes discrepents dels governants soviètics foren assassinats per ordres del totpoderós Stalin [Nin being one and Trotsky the other]" (23). She describes a Republican Spain where variations of communism had co-existed, explaining that the POUM's critical position regarding Stalin's appearance after Lenin's death raised suspicions and provoked accusations that there were Trotsky sympathizers in its ranks. Previously, in her account of the war in

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2 Pàmies also maintains that during the war she was critical of the position of the leaders of the Aliança Nacional de la Dona Jove that rejected the participation of members of the POUM's Joventut Comunista Ibèrica because of ideological differences.
Quan érem capitans (1976), Pàmies energetically defended the party line and dismissed the assassination of Nin and the reprisals suffered by others associated with the POUM after the May 1937 events as insignificant in the larger picture of the war effort and the requirements of communist discipline. In this text, she first insists on their ignorance: “...però, sense ànim apologètic de cap mena, estic segura que aquell crim —si crim hi hagué— es va cometre sense que els militants del PSUC [Catalan Communist Party] en sabessin res” (91), and she then maintains that support for the assassination would have been strong among the rank and file: “...si ens haguessin preguntat als que n’érem militants si calia afusellar l’Andreu Nin, dirigent del ‘putch trotsquisto-feixista’, hauríem contestat: ‘Sí. I és aquesta la línia a retener’” (91-2).3 Although the rectification found in Els anys de lluita is brief, it clearly represents a break with her past position.

After mentioning some figures that abused communism, she ends with an account of her presentation of the Premi Internacional Alfons Comín to Alexander Dubcek in Barcelona in 1991. Pàmies explains that his wife had died a year earlier after suffering greatly due to the “punishment” of the family following the Prague Spring. In conversation about those years, his son adds accounts of “mostres de solidaritat de gent que no s’interessà mai per la política” (84). The author concludes with the following “lesson”: “En aquelles paraules del fill del líder de la Primavera de Praga hi vaig copiar l’essència de la reivindicació que la justificà: un SOCIALISME DE ROSTRE HUMA, que encara no ha triomfat en cap país del món” (84). Despite the critique that she is now able to construct, Pàmies is not willing to dismiss communism completely, but rather holds fast to the idea that a “humane” version has never had a chance to flourish. She suggests that it might be part of the way future generations can avoid “[l’exterminio total del sistema capitalista enolfitt de cobdicia” (84) referred to earlier. In the end, it turns out that Pàmies has skillfully defended communism not as it has been practiced, but in its potential. She has subtly demonstrated that the system does have some intrinsic value or worth that might be productive in the future.

With this volume, Pàmies makes a significant contribution to the necessary revision of a part of Spanish and Catalan political history. While she never questions communist goals and ideals, or the necessity of taking certain actions at particular moments, there is the recognition here that mistakes were made, something that one does not find in her earlier memoirs evoking the same period. Clearly, the revolution she and her father (and so many others) were working for was never realized, but in Els anys de lluita the author attempts to pass on to her grandchildren and their generation the conviction that she firmly holds on to, and one that also serves to validate their actions: despite all that has happened, the defeat of capitalism is still the only hope for the future.

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3 See Stewart for further analysis of Pàmies’s position in Quan érem capitans.