

Dolores Ibárruri and the  
Expansion of Women's Role in the Republican Vision of Spain  
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The Spanish Civil War attempted to reconcile two distinct visions of the future: one based in a Catholic, monarchial history and one born of growing secular, communist sentiments. Allegiances fell either with the Republican's, including socialists, communists, anarchists, and the governing body of the newly formed Second Spanish Republic, or with the Nationalist who spoke for the Catholic and monarchist rebels. The visions of Spain which these two groups held included distinct understandings of social divisions such as race, class, religion, and political structure.<sup>1</sup> However, as noted by Joan Scott, gender is a particularly useful analytical tool in the study of history, and an examination of the prescribed gender roles of each Spanish party give great insight into the broader social tensions of this period.<sup>2</sup> Though the Republican party offered more political freedoms to women than the traditional Spanish alternative, there existed little precedent for female leadership in their hierarchies. Even in the most liberal communist circles, where it was publicly stated that "women must seek their economic independence" and social liberty, very few women occupied high ranking positions.<sup>3</sup>

Dolores Ibárruri, "[un] gran parte del valor patrimonial y memorístico del Partido Comunista de España" who, "durante la Guerra Civil... se convirtió en el emblema de la resistencia republicana," became a primary exception to this trend.<sup>4</sup> In addition to occupying a highly visible public role, Ibárruri used her position to expand women's place in the Republican narrative which, like other combative narratives, would have otherwise remained neutrally male

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (Colombia University Press: New York, 1988), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas F. Glick. "Sexual Reform, Psychoanalysis, and the Politics of Divorce in Spain in the 1920s and 1930s," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 1 (2003): 87.

<sup>4</sup> Vicente J Benet, "Usos Mediáticos Del Carisma De Dolores Ibárruri En Los Inicios De La Transición 1," *Estudios Sobre El Mensaje Periodístico* 22, no. 1 (2016): 78.

Translation: "a large part of the patrimonial and memorial value of the Communist Party of Spain"  
David Ginard I Féron, "«La Madre De Todos Los Camaradas», Dolores Ibárruri Como Símbolo Movilizador, De La Guerra Civil a La Transición Posfranquista," *Ayer*, no. 90 (2013): 197.

Translation: "during the Civil War became the emblem of Republican resistance."

centered. A close reading of Ibárruri's public discourse within the Civil War period reveals that she achieved this inclusion of women in three distinct ways: by addressing women as the main subject of a speech and highlighting their specific value, by addressing women as simply one piece of anti-fascist forces and the future of Spain, and finally by not distinguishing women at all from her address of "Spain," but rather allowing her position as a woman who has "crossed into the public sphere" to nonverbally include them.<sup>5</sup> Practiced in unison, these strategies successfully expanded women's role in a vision of the Spanish future that liberal male discourse did not.

#### Method One: Subverting the Dominant Gender Narrative

With the start of the Civil War, the "many disagreements in Spain with regard to women's appropriate role," became even more pronounced and politically divisive.<sup>6</sup> Through most of the modern period, Spanish gender roles were primarily dictated by the Roman Catholic Church. Gina Ann Herman notes that "prior to the Second Republic, the vast majority of Spanish women lived under an economic, domestic, and religious dictatorship ruled by and in the name of the Father: ... the priest, the husband, the male head of the household."<sup>7</sup> Women primarily derived social value from their premarital virginity and their post-marital roles as wives and mothers. Though Catholicism did provide women certain leadership opportunities, this status was contingent on a specific sexual conformity and social domesticity.

Because of this connection between familial and political structures, pre-war sexual reformists identified divorce reform as the most efficient route to legal liberation. This

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<sup>5</sup> Kristine Byron, "Writing the Female Revolutionary Self: Dolores Ibárruri and the Spanish Civil War," *Journal of Modern Literature* 28, no. 1 (2004): 141.

<sup>6</sup> Byron, 150.

<sup>7</sup> Gina Ann Herrmann, "The Self Writing War: Memory Texts of the Spanish Civil War and the Antifascist Resistance" (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998): 41.

movement conflicted with traditionally Catholic marital ideals, and the newly defined Nationalist party opposed most sexual reformist efforts.<sup>8</sup> In an exploration of literary narratives of Spain in the period before the outbreak of the Civil War, Otoño notes that “a strong association between nationalism ... and traditional domesticity, which allies the nationalist movements with masculinity,” also led women to seek more liberated roles beyond the Nationalist party.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, communism afforded women the opportunity to extend their influence beyond traditional womanhood, making the Republican cause particularly inviting to politically center or left leaning women. Republicans specifically targeted these groups, circulating posters with the words, “¡Campesina! Tu trabajo en el campo fortalece el espíritu de los que combaten,” accompanied by the image of a woman wielding a pitchfork whose shadow reflects an armed man. The Republican’s attempted to communicate throughout the Civil War period that they saw women’s role as crucial to victory.<sup>10</sup>

In the eyes of the communist party, Dolores Ibárruri’s political persona acted as another form of outreach to leftist women. Despite being raised in a traditionally Catholic family, Ibárruri had expressed discomfort with the gendered tenants of the faith and found social liberation in her political pursuits. “Mi nueva fe era más justa y solida que la de religiosa,” she would later write. Like many others, she saw herself as “exchanging a religion that oppresses women (Catholicism) for one that is potentially liberating for women.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Glick, 68-97.

<sup>9</sup> Roberta Johnson, "Gender and Nation in Spanish Fiction Between the Wars (1898–1936," *Revista Canadiense De Estudios Hispánicos* 21, no. 1 (1996): 171.

<sup>10</sup> Spanish Communist Party, “Communist propaganda poster for farm women,” (poster) Madrid 1936. Posters for the Spanish Civil War, Collection University of California at Dan Diego, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/p/240.html> (accessed May 11, 2019).

Translation: “Countrywoman! Your work in the country fertilizes the spirit of those that fight”

<sup>11</sup> I Féron, 196.

Translation: “My new faith was more just and solid than the one that is religious.”  
Byron, 150.

Ibárruri wished to push beyond the theoretical inclusion of women in this new, liberal space and actively presented Spanish women in assertive, non-traditional roles. On September 4, 1936, Ibárruri delivered an address to the women serving on the Republican front. The uncharacteristically narrativized speech began with a description of the female subject of her story: “She was...a member of the civilian militia... [and] she clasped her rifle with ardor, as though it were not a weapon of death but a much-desired plaything.” Already, Ibárruri is creating a vision of Spanish women which differs even from the feared archetype of the New Woman: a woman who is not only capable of surviving at the front, but is so comfortable there that she desires her weapons as objects of joy.<sup>12</sup> Ibárruri continues: “A light burned in her eyes. They expressed hatred, inflexible determination and courage.”<sup>13</sup> This woman clearly does not satisfy the demands of social domesticity which the Nationalists preferred.

Though Spanish women did express a great deal of interest in fighting at the front and some did follow through with this promise, many never made it to the battle grounds.<sup>14</sup> Few women would see combat or take drastic political action. No doubt aware of this fact, Ibárruri’s story created a primarily imagined role which most women would never inhabit. This does not make her narrative irrelevant, but rather gives all women, whether they are rural, agricultural laborers or factory employees, an opportunity to see themselves as heroic, assertive characters.

However, even in her address of women in this new role, the power that she grants them does not entirely belong to them. When the Ibárruri of this story approaches the “fighting woman” and asks about her motivations, the woman replies that she has traveled to the front “to

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<sup>12</sup> Elsa Herrmann, “This Is the New Woman,” In *Lives and Voices: Sources in European Women’s History*, edited by Lisa DiCaprio and Merry E. Wiesner, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000, 455-456.

<sup>13</sup> Dolores Ibárruri, “Women at the Front” (speech), September 4, 1936, “Marxist Internet Archive,” transcript, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ibarruri/1936/09/04.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Herrmann, “The Self-Writing War: Memory Text of the Spanish Civil and the Anti-Fascist Resistance,” 44.

fight fascism, to crush the enemies of the working people, and...to avenge the death of [her] brother.”<sup>15</sup> Even in this assertive role, her power is derived in reference to men. She continues, “I have come... to show the fascist scoundrels that when men die, women take their place. We are fighting with the same courage and enthusiasm as men. We have learned from them how to die.”<sup>16</sup> Whether her power stems from men’s presence or their absence, the woman of the story is prompted to act by a male-centered war story.

Rather than viewing this as a nullification of Ibárruri’s progressive statement or a slip which reveals her to be subconsciously ruled by traditional Spanish gender roles, a more careful reading displays Ibárruri’s complex compromise; she must keep men relevant in order to access the platform on which to inspire women at all. Additionally, Spanish tradition not only works on her, but is something which she can appropriate as a rhetorical tool as well. “[This woman,] like the other girls and women who are challenging death... is reviving the tradition of the heroines who throughout our history have fought for independence and a constitution—the heroines of Sagunto and Nuñantia, La Vaillida, Augustina of Aragon, Maria Pita, Manuela Sanchez, Mariana Pineda,” Ibárruri continues, directly connecting these women at the front with a string of historically political, combative women.<sup>17</sup>

As Kristine Byron notes, female political leaders of this period, including Ibárruri, were “conscious of their invasion of the ‘male’ territory [and] carefully [wove] their narratives using gendered discursive strategies and modes of representation which make apparent their sense of gender politics.”<sup>18</sup> While maintaining a sense of male-centered power, Ibárruri subverts this

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<sup>15</sup> Ibárruri, “Women at the Front.”

<sup>16</sup> Ibárruri, “Women at the Front.”

<sup>17</sup> Ibárruri, “Women at the Front.”

<sup>18</sup> Byron, 144.

dominant Nationalist narrative by expanding women's social role beyond that of familial domesticity and into one of assertive combat.

### Method Two: Presenting Women as One Part of the Spanish Whole

Though the first decade of the century had proven to be a respite from a string of late 19<sup>th</sup> century conflicts, the 1930s brought another wave of political turmoil which resulted in a dictatorship that would last until 1975. Once hailed as a formative empire, Spain “encountered much difficulty in becoming... unified politically,” primarily because this empire had depended on social notions now counter to the sentiments of the growing working class.<sup>19</sup> The new democratic political system of the Second Republic, in addition to the day to day effects of uneven modernization and economic development, contributed to the growing popularity of Marxism.<sup>20</sup>

Noting the popularity of these sentiments, Ibárruri expanded the traditional sphere of Spanish women by referencing their contributions and traumatic experiences as a part of the communist, Spanish struggle. She utilized socially accessible tropes, such as martyrdom, “with equal room for women and men.”<sup>21</sup> She also centered women within the communist vision by linking their identities with that of the small town and a personification of Spain. Women represent a crucial part of the whole in each of these scenarios.

Women are clearly framed as a part of the whole in *¡No Pasarán!* — Ibárruri's most famous speech.<sup>22</sup> This peak of her motivational career exists not only in the influence of the moment but in the national war memory of this time. On August 23, 1936, over 100,000 people

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<sup>19</sup> Payne, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Payne, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Byron, 151.

<sup>22</sup> Translation: “They (fascists) shall not pass!”

gathered in Mestal Stadium in Valencia to listen to Ibárruri deliver a moving address urging the Republicans to stay vigilant against the Nationalist forces.<sup>23</sup> After outlining the struggle at the front which she has just witnessed, Ibárruri delivered the famous line “¡No Pasarán!” and addressed the specific sources of Republican hope.

Among the groups which she mentioned, including the youth, the soldiers, and the workers, she also mentioned women — specifically women of small towns: “Â ¡Mujeres, heroicas mujeres del pueblo!”<sup>24</sup> In linking women to the struggles of small towns and communities, she solidified women’s role in the communist cause and the values of the Republicans: “Luchad también vosotras al lado de los hombres para defender la vida y la libertad de vuestros hijos, que el fascismo amenaza!”<sup>25</sup> The specific reference to the heroism of these women, although relative to men, urged women to fight with men and divides these two distinct groups only as parts of the whole.

Ibárruri also referenced the female specific violence of the war. “The raping of women is a common thing in places occupied by the rebels,” she noted publicly in her speech titled “Better to Die Standing than to Live Kneeling” in September of 1936.<sup>26</sup> Mentioning the primarily female trauma of rape, especially as a tactic of combat, is unusual in this time period. Even more unique is the connection she drew between the trauma of women’s bodies and “villainies perpetrated by the fascists” against small

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<sup>23</sup>Dolores Ibárruri, “Fascism shall not Pass” (speech), September 4, 1936, “Marxist Internet Archive,” transcript, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ibarruri/1936/09/04.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Translation: “To women! Heroic women of the towns!”

Dolores Ibárruri, “¡No Pasarán!” (speech), July 18, 1936, transcript, <https://beersandpolitics.com/no-pasaran-2>.

<sup>25</sup> Dolores Ibárruri, “¡No Pasarán!” (speech), July 18, 1936, transcript, <https://beersandpolitics.com/no-pasaran-2>.

Translation: “Remember the heroism of the Asturian women in 1934; fight at the men’s side to defend the life of liberty of your children, which fascism threatens!”

<sup>26</sup> Dolores Ibárruri, “Better to Die Standing than to Live Kneeling” (speech), September 4, 1936, “Marxist Internet Archive,” transcript, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ibarruri/1936/09/04.htm>.

towns.<sup>27</sup> Again, because of the centrality of small towns in the communist vision, by connecting women's struggles, as well as their contributions, with those of small communities she centered women as well.

Ibárruri went even further to center women in the personification of Spain itself. Beyond simply distinguishing women as primary workers of the land, she also connected the land itself, particularly her own Basque land, with women. "The Basque country has been reduced to ruins. Her mountainous cliffs and evergreen summits have been ploughed by fascist shells. Her towns, villages and farmhouses—the homes of a noble, strong, enterprising, honest and industrious people—have been razed to the ground," she continued.<sup>28</sup> The Spanish language is highly gendered and it is not unusual to refer to land as feminine, however the placement of this passage directly after the centering of women in the communist vision complicates what would be a simplistic assumption. She purposefully extended the concept of physically conquering the land and the small communities of Spain with the trauma of women.

According to Byron's analysis, Ibárruri "operates in a double narrative of self and of nation." In these previous examples she simply extended this narrative of herself to the collective narrative of all women. As a person of Basque descent—if not Nationality—she "employs Spanish history (particularly that of Basque Country) as both epic and tragic, subtly setting herself up as the epic hero."<sup>29</sup> Though acting subtly, this centered women as a crucial part of the communist effort. Because she saw this effort as the struggle for Spain, she framed women as crucial to the success of the entire country as well.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibárruri, "Better to Die Standing than to Live Kneeling."

<sup>28</sup> Ibárruri, "Better to Die Standing than to Live Kneeling."

<sup>29</sup> Byron, 140.

### Method #3: Enforcing Spanish Unity

As the daughter of a Basque miner, Ibárruri had an interest in worker's rights and anti-fascist action from a young age. With the founding of the Communist Party of Spain in 1920, Ibárruri moved to Madrid and began to speak and write publicly for the party. The start of the Civil War, more specifically when the purpose of the party became unified with the Republican cause, defined her main political function as a character of inspiration for the working-class Spaniards.<sup>30</sup> Her comfortably progressive presentation, as defined by the standards of her male counterparts, allowed her to exist in a position of political leadership. This balance in her presentation, as in her rhetoric, allowed her to make new spaces for women.

Frederica Montseny, an anarchist contemporary of Ibárruri noted that, "Dolores Ibárruri was lucky in that the Communist party needed a feminine banner and they found it in her." Montseny highlights how Ibárruri's careful crafting of her political representation made her respectable in the eyes of male communist leaders. When Montseny described how "[Ibárruri] was well received in the international leftist context: a Spanish woman, dressed in black, who gave moving speeches, who pronounced epic slogans such as 'They shall not pass,'" her tone implied dishonesty on Ibárruri's part.<sup>31</sup>

Previous scholarship has acted similarly: seeking a clear answer to the question of how Ibárruri created such a politically successful, prominent public image. They "go back to her autobiography with the intention of finding her 'human' side, her private self," looking for the

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<sup>30</sup> Byron, 139.

<sup>31</sup> Frederica Montseny, quoted in Kristine Byron, "Writing the Female Revolutionary Self: Dolores Ibárruri and the Spanish Civil War," *Journal of Modern Literature* 28, no. 1 (2004): 141.

“intimacy of this communist hero ... in private slippages.”<sup>32</sup> David Ginard I Féron notes that, “fue en distintas momentos de su vida madre, hermana, viuda, y/o abuela de los militantes y simpatizantes comunistas, de la clase obrera y del conjunto del pueblos español.”<sup>33</sup> Like others, I Féron seeks to define what is public, what is private, and to find a sense of reality and pretense within her identity.

Though Ibárruri certainly wore black throughout the war, and many read her as the grieving mother of the dying Spanish youth at the front, Ibárruri never used motherhood as a tactic of verbal motivation in her public discourse. Even in her private correspondents, such as in a letter to her son written in October of 1936, she uses a remarkably political tone. She urges him to “be ready to sacrifice [himself] to the end in behalf of our cause,” revealing that even the desire to motivate her son did not stem from the perspective of typical or traditional Spanish motherhood.<sup>34</sup>

Though many have read this unstated motherhood as a subconscious new Marianism, Ibárruri was not ignorant of the gendered state of Spanish politics and their roots in Spanish familial structures. At one time, Ibárruri went as far as to compare marriage to her time spent in prison.<sup>35</sup> Byron notes that “being a prisoner, Ibárruri might argue, is not that different from being a worker, and a woman prisoner, a woman worker, and a wife and mother all suffer under the institutions that confine them.”<sup>36</sup> “Many of [Ibárruri’s] speeches and articles during the war

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<sup>32</sup> Herrmann, “The Self-Writing War: Memory Text of the Spanish Civil and the Anti-Fascist Resistance,” 59, 68.

<sup>33</sup> I Féron, 2.

Translation: “There were distinct moments in her life which were that of a mother, sister, widow, and/or grandmother of the communist militants and sympathizers, of the working class and of the Spanish people as a whole.”

<sup>34</sup> Dolores Ibárruri, “Letter to her Son” (letter), July 30, 1936, “Marxist Internet Archive,” transcript, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ibarruri/1936/09/04.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> Kevin O'Donnell, “The New Marianism of Dolores Ibárruri's “El Unico Camino,”” *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 6 (2002): 29.

<sup>36</sup> Byron, 146.

stressed women's active role in the resistance. She clearly linked this to women's new role in society," and the perception of her maternal nature, rather than the statement of it, is the result of her intentional action.<sup>37</sup>

In contrast to the previously spoken methods and the non-verbal nature of her presentation, Ibárruri's third method expanded women's roles by not differentiating them from her audience at all. This third method depended on the previous two, confirming that these methods work in an intentional unison. In many of her speeches, including all of those which have previously been mentioned, Ibárruri ends by addressing Spain as a unit. In "Women at the Front," she described the contribution of women in combat as "bound up in the revolutionary traditions of our people." In "¡No Pasarán!," she followed her list of categories with "¡Españoles todos!" In "Better to Die Standing than to Live Kneeling," she began with "the whole Spanish people," spoke to the struggle of women as previously described, and then ended with her plea in the name of "we." In each of these cases, Ibárruri followed her distinction of Spanish women with statements of unity which do not distinguish them at all. This integrated women into the whole image of Spain and its struggle.

A few of Ibárruri's speeches, such as one titled "Restrain the Hands of Interventionist!," did not mention women at all. This speech, like the rest, ended with a sentiment of unity, through statements such as "we can cope with this insurrection ourselves," and "the whole Spanish people."<sup>38</sup> However, despite the fact that Ibárruri did not specify women, they are no longer excluded from the vision of "Spain" as a whole

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<sup>37</sup> Byron, 150.

<sup>38</sup> Dolores Ibárruri, "Restrain the Hand of Interventionists!" (speech), July 30, 1936, "Marxist Internet Archive," transcript, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ibarruri/1936/09/04.htm>.

unit because she has acted to intentionally to include them in her rhetoric in the past. Because of this established pattern in many of her speeches, whenever she spoke to “Spain,” women were implicitly included, even in those moments when she deviated from her standard pattern.

Additionally, Ibárruri’s own position naturally included women. When she spoke to Spain to assert a sense of unity, she included herself in the referenced “we.” This rhetorical choice enforced the sense of trust which the public had in her and strengthened the ethos of her platform as a working-class Spaniard. However, because she identified and presents publicly as a woman and had previously aligned herself with the “we” of Spanish women, she naturally included them every time that she included herself. More than an act of inclusion, this expanded the typical role and vision of Spanish women by nature of her exceptional political role.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, each of these methods display how Ibárruri carefully crafted a unified, communist vision of Spain that expanded the political and social roles of women. As Byron notes, “A close reading of her texts shows how she breaks the stereotypes of the passive female party loyalist and the idealized Spanish woman. While at the same time she was constrained by having to work within these systems of representation in order to accomplish her political goals.”<sup>39</sup> Practically, her influence depended on a pattern: a calculated balance between progressive, liberal notions, and established, comfortable Spanish ideals.

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<sup>39</sup> Byron, 140.

Unfortunately, this idealized vision of Spain would not be realized in Ibárruri's lifetime. Though the Republican's fought against the rise of Nationalism, Franco's forces eventually claimed victory and Ibárruri, along with many others, were forced to flee the country. Though she did return in her old age, Ibárruri still noted the feminist actions which were lacking in Spanish socialism. She dedicated the remainder of her life to direct political action which she saw as mending this gap.

Much of the modern scholarship of Ibárruri attempts to distinguish contradictory facets of her identity: secularism and Catholicism, Basque and Spanish, woman and political leader. These contradictions do not only exist with Ibárruri, but within many women of this period. Beyond that, they exist even within the shifting identity of Spain. Ultimately, the desire to divide these seemingly contrary aspects of selfhood or nationhood is not only reductive but dangerous.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Kevin O'Donnell, "The New Marianism of Dolores Ibárruri's "El único Camino"," *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 6 (2002): 29.

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