

# Letras Hispanas

## Volume 15, 2019

**TITLE:** *Las Cortes republicanas durante la Guerra Civil: Madrid 1936, Valencia 1937 y Barcelona 1938*

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**PUBLISHER:** Fondo de Cultura Económica

**YEAR:** 2017

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The accumulation of the now almost endless quantity of books about the Spanish Civil War began soon after the war was over. Seemingly every *diputado* in exile published a memoir describing his or her personal experience and arguing about how the war started and how the Republic lost. Yet Matilde de la Torre's reflections on three sessions of the wartime Cortes offer unique insights to scholars of the period in a format that is far from an ordinary memoir. Matilde de la Torre Gutiérrez was a Cantabrian writer and journalist and from 1933 a Socialist *diputada* for Asturias. Retreating before the advancing Nationalist forces, the Cortes took on an itinerant air as it moved from Madrid to Valencia to Barcelona over the course of the war. In the three essays collected in this volume, De la Torre focuses on just one session from each of these three locations. This technique allows her plenty of room for description and digression while maintaining a unity to her story in a way that a standard political memoir attempting to cover the entire three-year war might not be able to achieve.

Given this unusual format, De la Torre's accounts will appeal to literary scholars interested in the blends of genres that emerged from the left-wing propagandists of 1930s Spain. On one page, De la Torre might replicate the typical Socialist rhetoric of *El Socialista*. On the next page, the narrative might read more like a novel, with extended descriptions

of her meager accommodations or of the halls where the different sessions took place. These descriptions at times seem melodramatic, but at other times they are moving, such as when she observes all the vacant seats of the deputies killed in the war. De la Torre is at her best in yet other passages where she serves as an astute political observer. Not only do her character descriptions offer insights for biographers into the personalities of such figures as Indalecio Prieto and Dolores Ibárruri "la Pasionaria," but also her political commentaries present nuanced observations on such questions as the Basque autonomy statute and the Prieto-Juan Negrín feud. While most of her opinions echo the standard Socialist program, her work reminds the reader that the lines between the Prieto and Negrín factions or between the Socialists and Communists were not as hard as one might imagine. She defends the intentions of both Prieto and Negrín and expresses a measured sympathy for the Communist Party, from which she counts Ibárruri and Margarita Nelken as friends.

While De la Torre does describe a closeness with these fellow female deputies, scholars looking for discussion of her experience as a woman in the male-dominated sphere of Republican politics may be disappointed. Like other female politicians of the time, she seems to feel that consideration of the "women's question" should be put on hold so that all efforts may be dedicated to the pursuit of the

war. Indeed, her main arguments throughout her book are that the war must continue to be fought and the institutions of democracy maintained at all costs. However, reading between the lines, a gendered analysis of this text could be conducted. She seems to be seeking to strike a balance between showing that she put on a brave face in those difficult times and that she experienced the emotions expected of her as a woman. For example, she is about to cry when she thinks of the fallen deputies mentioned earlier, but another representative cautions her that “no es el momento,” and she responds “no soy más que una mujer” (89). It is a surprising reply from a feminist activist, but one that highlights the extent to which female leaders were willing to play more traditional women’s roles during the war.

This edition publishes De la Torre’s reflections on the wartime Cortes for the first time. The editor, Francisca Vilches-de

Frutos, prudently limits herself to correcting typographical errors and the like when transcribing these unedited manuscripts for publication. Vilches-de Frutos’ introduction highlights in a clear and insightful manner what De la Torre’s text offers to scholars. Vilches-de Frutos also adds footnotes that are for the most part limited to basic biographical information about the people mentioned in the text. Unfortunately, these footnotes do not provide enough background for the non-specialist reader to understand all of De la Torre’s references. Nevertheless, this edition does those studying the civil war a great service by making De la Torre’s work accessible for the first time. And the researcher will find plenty to be discovered here: colorful anecdote, political insight and above all, the reflections of a woman struggling to find humanity and even humor in one of the darkest periods in Spain’s history.