

HEMINGWAY, MAILER, AND THE “REDS”

V I C T O R P E P P A R D

ERNEST HEMINGWAY AND NORMAN MAILER BOTH WROTE fiction and journalism that deal with what I am calling here the “Reds.” In Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and in Mailer’s *Harlot’s Ghost* and *Oswald’s Tale* Reds or communists of different types, stripes, and nationalities appear in various significant roles and guises. There are several questions I would like to address, especially the following: What is it that attracted Hemingway and Mailer to write about the Reds? Even if they depict very different historical periods, can we still discern certain commonalities in their approaches to and treatment of the Reds? Further, what is the dominant image of them in the works of Hemingway and Mailer?

That Hemingway and Mailer share a number of common interests and traits is no secret. Both artists dealt extensively and importantly with the horrors of war and with the ways in which people cope with war and conduct themselves in it. Both writers were preoccupied (some might even say obsessed with) macho tests of manhood that in the case of Hemingway involved balls, battles, boxing, bulls, and hunting and fishing. For Mailer balls were also always in play, but he was more of a boxer than a bullfighter, and he was always a battler whatever the arena. A corollary to this is their fascination with the stars and celebrities of American pop culture—and with their own stardom and celebrity as well.

Hemingway and Mailer were deeply in love with language, and not just English, as we see in the former’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which exudes his fondness for Spanish. Mailer studied German assiduously as preparation for writing *The Castle in the Forest*, and he also worked with Russian in connection with his trips to the Soviet Union, as is evident in *Harlot’s Ghost*,

Oswald's Tale, and *Castle in the Forest*. Their stylistic innovations, well celebrated in Hemingway but not yet fully recognized in Mailer, are no doubt related to this love of language that they shared. Further, neither writer hesitated to tackle the burning issues of the day, in and out of their fiction. Thus, it is no wonder they both engaged with the two most controversial and problematic "isms" of their century, Communism and Fascism.

Before examining *For Whom the Bell Tolls* it is instructive briefly to consider Hemingway's relationship to the Spanish Civil War, which he witnessed primarily as a journalist who wrote about the conflict. William Braasch Watson has shown how, in his attitude toward this war, Hemingway moved from a position of complete abhorrence of all war to an ardent supporter of the Republican / Loyalist / Red or Communist cause against the Fascists / Falangists / Francoists, largely under the influence of Jorvis Ivens, an avid Communist and member of the Comintern (37–57). Watson comes to the conclusion that in his enthusiasm for the Comintern / Communist cause Hemingway distorted the truth:

He suppressed certain realities he knew to be true and he promoted as realities things he must have known to be false, all in the name of winning a war whose character the Communists had largely defined. In this respect Hemingway had become an effective propagandist He genuinely admired the Communists for their commitment and for their proven ability to organize and fight the war. But partly too his transformation was the product of a conscious effort on the part of the Communists to gain his confidence and to enlist his support. (53)

It should be stressed that Watson is writing about Hemingway's journalism and not his fiction. Naturally, one has to ask whether in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* Hemingway continues to portray the Spanish Civil War in the same fashion as Watson describes. I believe that in the novel Hemingway's treatment of the Reds does indeed include a measure of admiration, but it also contains a much fuller depiction of them and their conduct of the war that includes both direct and indirect condemnation of certain communist actors and their acts. Let me quickly say that in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, despite an open sympathy for the Loyalist-Red cause, Hemingway complicates the actual conduct of the war by both sides, as well as the associated moral

questions, to a degree that renders any pat conclusions about these matters more than problematic.

What Hemingway describes in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* has some interesting correspondences with the depiction of the Russian civil war by Russian writers such as Isaac Babel, Vasily Grossman, Vsevolod Ivanov, Nikolai Nikitin, Boris Pil'niak, and Andrei Platonov in their works of the early and mid-1920s and, in the case of Grossman, the early 1930s. These Russian authors portray the atrocities of the Reds, Whites, Greens, anarchists such as Makhno, and assorted marauding bands in graphic scenes of brutality, cruelty, and above all violence. Frequently, the various principals of the war—mostly, but not just the Reds and Whites—alternate in taking over towns and villages, and it is usually impossible to distinguish their violent methods from one another. Furthermore, the local villagers and townsfolk are invariably clueless about the great issues of ideology and policy history has associated with the Russian Civil War, and they struggle to understand what is happening to and around them in terms of the cultural practices the past has given them. At the same time, the Russian fiction of this period, such as Babel's stories in *Red Cavalry* (*Konarmia*), 1926, often exhibit a certain "revolutionary romanticism" that treats the Civil War not so much as a struggle rooted in politics or ideology but as a great force of nature sweeping across the land.

I mention this because Hemingway read some of these Russian authors, including Platonov, and because his treatment of the Spanish Civil War has, as I am claiming, significant points of contact with their work. For example, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* the Reds' takeover of a town, so brutally led by Pablo and so eloquently described by Pilar, is followed three days later by a fascist takeover that was even worse (Hemingway 129). Judging by both Hemingway and the Russian authors mentioned here, these horrific cyclical reigns the combatants inflict on towns, villages, and cities appear to be an inevitable phenomenon of any civil war.

The tendency throughout *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, as we see in the case of the town just mentioned, that Robert A. Martin has identified as Ronda in Malaga Province (63) is for each of the sides to match or exceed each other in the commission of atrocities. For instance, the beheading of Sordo and his men that the fascist Lt. Burrendo orders is followed shortly by Pablo's execution of several men he has recruited to help with the blowing up of the bridge. When reflecting on Pilar's story, Robert Jordan admits to himself

that he always knew that the side he was fighting for behaved as she described and that however much he hates this “that damned woman made me see it as though I had been there” (135).

In a number of places in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* it is clear that the loyalists are executing non-fascists, perhaps most dramatically in the case of Don Guillermo, who is killed, as H. R. Stoneback points out, because of his loyalty to his wife whose religiosity was taken as proof she is a fascist (106). Robert Jordan wonders at times about the real commitment of his erstwhile enemies to the fascist cause, in particular that of a boy he has killed in battle (304). Here Jordan concludes that he simply has to kill whether it is wrong or not.

Robert Jordan's band of battlers for the Republic, not unlike many of the characters in Russian fiction of the 1920s, are shown at various levels of commitment to and belief in the cause. Pilar is no doubt the most avid devotee of the new red atheism, as we see when she declares that “[b]efore we had religion and other nonsense. Now for every one there should be some one to whom one can speak frankly” (89). Yet even Pilar can waver in her faith in atheism as when she says, “There probably still is God after all, although we have abolished him” (88). For all of its many ironies, I do not see a great deal of humor in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, but this example is surely an exception. It is also a most effective way to capture the ambivalence the Spanish Reds experience as they try out their newfound atheism.

Pablo is someone whose beliefs, if any, are most mercurial and murky, but at one point he invokes God and the Virgen (sic). This prompts Pilar, acting in her role as law giver, to rebuke him for talking that way (90). In moments of crisis, as when Joaquín prays to the Virgin Mary at death, and when Maria prays for Robert Jordan's safety, Republicans of various degrees of redness tend to revert back to their traditional cultural practices.

The case of Robert Jordan is special for a number of reasons, primarily of course because he is an American who is taking orders from a Soviet general, but also because he is a fascinating combination of stubborn commitment to what he sees as his duty and his far ranging and sensitive introspection and contemplation. In the early passages of the novel Jordan might be easily mistaken for a hero straight out of Soviet Socialist Realism—not just because he agrees to the highly questionable orders of Soviet General Golz, but because his virtues are so strong and his motives are so pure. Over the course of the novel, however, Robert Jordan grows ever richer, more complex and

elusive as a character. In this sense, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is a concentrated case of a *Bildungsroman* that covers not an extended period of maturation but only about seventy hours, the last hours of Jordan's life. In the end, Jordan, for all of his attachment to the Republican cause, tells himself that he is "not a red Marxist" and not to "kid yourself with too much dialectics" (305). It is here that he undergoes the revelation that his love for Maria is the most important thing in his life and that such love is indeed the most important part of life. I would claim also (allowing for the fact that there were indeed genuine American communists such as Jorvis Ivens) that Jordan's "non-party" commitment to the Red/Republican cause is characteristically American in his lack of interest in the specifics of its ideology.

Hemingway's Soviet Russian characters play important parts in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and they are problematic in a number of ways and on a number of levels. First, the names of General Golz and the journalist Karkov look as though they are real Russian names, but they are not. This is my own (virtual native speaker's) reaction to these surnames that I have confirmed with actual native speakers of Russian. Kashkin, however, could be a genuine Russian family name. He is a double to Jordan, as they are both explosives experts. Kashkin's lack of resolve reflects the side of Robert Jordan that is sometimes subject to indecisiveness. The link between the fates of these two is made explicit when we learn that Robert Jordan killed the wounded Kashkin in an act of mercy so that Kashkin would not be tortured by the fascists. Kashkin's demise is also a foreshadowing of Jordan's who, as he lies with a broken left thigh, fights off the temptation to take his own life in order to avoid the sort of torture by the fascists he has spared Kashkin.

General Golz has formulated a strategy for winning a battle with the fascists that includes the plan to blow up the bridge, the central, culminating act toward which the plot of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* inexorably moves. This plan, however, is fraught with danger for Robert Jordan and the others who are supposed to carry it out. If Golz's indifference to the likely loss of life on the part of those carrying out his orders is on a certain level contemptible, it is more than convincing as a motivation for a general bent on victory at all cost. In one of the many passages of the novel that are so psychologically persuasive, Golz watches the Republican planes take off for battle. Golz, has learned from Robert Jordan via Andrés that the surprise attack he had conceived is no longer a surprise and that "it would be one famous balls up

more" (429), and allows himself to bask in the false glow of what might have been.

All he heard was the roar of the planes and he thought, now, maybe this time, listen to them come, maybe the bombers will blow them all off, maybe we will get a break-though, maybe he will get the reserves he asked for, maybe this is it, maybe this is the time. (430)

Although this passage openly broaches the fact that the Loyalist side made strategic mistakes, it is nothing like an overall critique of its conduct of the war. A far more damning instance that lays bare the cynical, opportunistic side of the International / Red / Republican project in the Spanish Civil War is found in the confrontation between the Soviet journalist Karkov and André Marty, the Frenchman who is a member of the Comintern. As Robert A. Martin shows, Karkov is drawn on the model of Stalin's personal journalist Koltsov, whereas Marty, also an actual historical figure, retains his own name in the novel (62). Marty, for whom, as Martin writes, Hemingway had "an intense personal animosity" (61), appears in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* as a paranoid, deranged careerist who is eager and willing to have executed anyone on his own side about whom he has the least suspicion. He is the embodiment of the worst side of the Comintern's involvement in the Spanish Civil War. He is also a prescient if unintentional portrait of many of Stalin's salient character traits, especially in his obsession with rooting out imaginary enemies.

Karkov-Koltsov, like Hemingway, detests Marty, who for all of his misdeeds has somehow remained untouchable, and he is determined to find Marty's "weakness" and expose it (Hemingway 418). When Karkov-Koltsov forces Marty to release unharmed Gomez and Andrés, who have brought the news from Robert Jordan that the fascists can no longer be subject to a surprise attack, he is asserting his role as the chief do-gooder of the Soviet contingent. Hemingway draws him as the righteous one who uses his privileged status as journalist and Stalin's right hand man to make things right in both Spain and the Soviet Union. I have to say that I find this portrait of Karkov-Koltsov to be naïve at best. It is the one place in the novel where Hemingway comes closest to the realm of Socialist Realism, where the heroes are all too good and too true to the cause to be true.

Lest anyone think I am about to attempt a deconstruction of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, let me say that whatever its minor faults may be I find the novel to be a work of real genius. (I will let specialists in American literature continue their battle over its rank among Hemingway's and America's great novels.) In addition to this multi-leveled novel's masterfully constructed plot and its superb development of a whole range of disparate characters, several of whom are imbued with the kinds of mythic qualities Robert E. Gajdusek attributes to them (113–30), I find that Hemingway's use of Spanish is both innovative and effective. Although he translates many of the Spanish passages, he lets others stand in the original, trusting the reader who does not know the language to deduce the meaning from the context. Furthermore, Hemingway's use of Spanish phraseology in English, as in "the woman of Pablo," and "What passes with thee?" and "thou askest" creates a kind of linguistic estrangement, a kind of "Inglespañol" that effectively conveys the Spanish speaking milieu of the novel as well as the point of view of the Spanish speaking hero Robert Jordan, who is a Spanish instructor at the University Montana in Missoula.

Much more could be said about language and style here, but I will add only one more comment. As Thomas E. Gould demonstrates, the American linguistic Puritanism of the 1930s would not permit Hemingway to use the obscenities his characters spoke in, nor would it permit explicit description of sexual acts (67–81). This last prohibition might be construed to have had one positive outcome with respect to Hemingway's description of the love making of Robert Jordan and Maria, because rather than describing their actions directly Hemingway uses a rich repertoire of metaphors. Hemingway's depiction of the third and final time Jordan and Maria make love, when together they reach "la gloria," is highly original and moving.

There is no other one but one now, one, going now, rising now, sailing now, leaving now, wheeling now, soaring now, away now, all the way now, all of all the way now, one and one is one, is one, is one, is one . . . is one in goodness, is one to cherish, is one now on earth with elbows against the cut and slept-on branches of the pine tree with the smell of the pine boughs and the night; to earth conclusively now, and with the morning of the day to come. (379)

I find this passage doubly noteworthy because its rhythmic, flowing, repetitive intonations are so unlike the straight-forward, gruff and blunt style Hemingway often employs. Here Hemingway also evokes the bond between nature and the characters, especially Robert Jordan, that he develops throughout the novel.

Over the course of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* we learn that not only do both sides commit the same atrocities on each other, but that they both pray to the same Virgin Mary. We further see that participants on both sides are appalled by the war itself. Agustín, who is one of the several mouthpieces in the novel for the senselessness of war says, “In this war there is an idiocy without bounds” (94). The fascist Lt. Burrendo comes to a similar conclusion, but his statement is redolent of unconscious irony and hypocrisy when he says, “what a bad thing war is” just after ordering the beheading of Sordo’s men (322). At the very end of the novel, Robert Jordan has Burrendo in his sights at twenty yards away, a range at which he can hardly miss his target. Jordan does not know of Burrendo’s previous perfidy; he only knows that he is the leader of the detachment of fascists who are hot on his trail and that of his companions—I should say comrades—after the bridge has been blown up. But we see that the author has a plan in mind for the fascist lieutenant to receive a poetically appropriate payback for his deeds. The novel ends before Robert Jordan shoots Burrendo, but Hemingway leaves no doubt that this will happen.

With all of the balancing and matching Hemingway does between the Republican and Fascist sides, we may conclude that with respect to the conduct of the war itself the warring parties are virtually equal in their employment of brutality and violence—including the execution of members of their own side who for whatever reason happened to displease someone such as Marty or Pablo. If there is any “romance” left over in Hemingway’s description of the Spanish Civil War, it has more to do with Spain than with the war. Even given the cynicism, corruption, and brutality of the Reds and Republicans that Hemingway exposes with much(o) gusto, he is still fundamentally in sympathy with their cause, the preservation of the Republic, for whatever else they are, they are not fascists.

Here, then, is my segue to Norman Mailer, who also uses Communism and Fascism as measures of each other. In 1984 Mailer made his first trip to Russia and the Soviet Union. This brief visit helped lay the groundwork for a much longer one in which he researched material and interviewed many

Soviet citizens in pursuit of material for *Oswald's Tale*. I should add here that Mailer had a built in, so to speak, predisposition to visit Russia, since as J. Michael Lennon, Mailer's authorized biographer, has pointed out to me, all four of his grandparents were from there. Mailer wrote an interesting article for the *Times* of London about the first trip in which he questions Ronald Reagan's famous declaration that the Soviet Union was "an evil empire" and also makes a plea for a more nuanced and mature relationship on the part of the US with the USSR. In addition to some perceptive observations on the life of the USSR at that time and comparisons with the US, Mailer writes,

American leaders are invariably ready to accept fascism in other countries and do business with it. Since fascism is the foul disease of the rich when capitalism breaks down, so our leaders can understand it. Communism, however, terrifies the American rich. After all, it is the tyranny of the poor when society breaks up altogether . . . It is significant that we have forgiven Nazi Germany for its concentration camps and the 15 million people the Nazis exterminated. We do great business with Germany, but we still do not exculpate the Russians for their gulags. (38)

One could certainly debate Mailer's conclusions, the sort of sweeping, summative analysis he was fond of making on the large questions of politics and life, but that is not the object here. My point is that forty-four years after the publication of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, for all of the differences in the contexts and the details, Mailer is using the F-ism to test and partially justify the C-ism in a way that is not unlike Hemingway's approach to the same question. And like Hemingway, Mailer comes down on the side of the now former Reds partly because they are not fascists.

We can say former Reds now not just because there is no longer a Soviet Union, but also because in Russia the word itself has long since lost the edge it possessed in the early years of the establishment of the Soviet state. Of course the word remains in such terms as the Red Army, but there it is in a vestigial role, not the provocative one it once had. Similarly, by the time Mailer began visiting the Soviet Union the energy of the 1930s, its frenzied "socialist building" had flowed over the dams of all those hydroelectric plants, flown up through the stacks of all the steel mills, and become frozen in the gray cement of the resulting Soviet concrete colossus. During Harry

Hubbard's visits to Moscow in *Harlot's Ghost*, Oswald's strange stay in the USSR chronicled in *Oswald's Tale*, and Mailer's own visit just mentioned, the overall impression one gets is that of hum-drum routine. The human energy that was voluntarily and forcibly put into the building of the new state's infrastructure was long since spent. I say forcibly because prisoners of the Gulag were used as laborers on many major and minor projects, including the building of the Moscow Metro, the extensive system of waterways linking Moscow with Leningrad-Petersburg, and the *Belomor* (White Sea) Canal. The romance associated with the Soviet intervention in Spain, amplified by cultural visits such as the one made by a Basque soccer team in 1937, was also long gone. Even if in the mid-1980s the Soviet Union was still a police state, Stalin's terror of the 1930s was over as well, and dissidents were, as Mailer wrote in 1984, "ostracized . . . but no longer pulled out of their beds at three in the morning" (36). By the mid-1980s, a Soviet version of the middle class had long since formed (at least in the cities) that provided its citizens a stable and predictable way of life. When Hubbard visits the Metropol Hotel in Moscow with "aged parquet that buckled like cheap linoleum when you stepped on it" (*Harlot's* 99), he cannot believe that this is the place where the Bolsheviks gathered before and after the Revolution. "I was furious suddenly at I knew not what. How did these people presume to be our greatest enemy on earth? They did not even have the wherewithal to be evil" (107).

Hubbard shortly backs away from this apparently definitive repost to the Reagan doctrine when he reflects that "Communism might well be evil. That is an awesome and terrible thesis, but then the simple can reign over the complex" (103). Even the statue of fearsome Felix Dzerzhinsky in Lyubanka Square and the Lyubanka prison itself fail to "stir adrenaline" in Hubbard, who knows he might wind up there (104). When he walks out onto Red Square, whose ancient name means Beautiful Square in Russian, Hubbard is struck by his impression that "[e]ven the young had an air of relinquishment that speaks of middle age" (105).

Throughout *Harlot's Ghost* Mailer describes how the CIA and the KGB engaged in competition with each other in both Latin America, especially Uruguay, and in Berlin. (Mailer also describes the CIA's and Hubbard's activities in "Red" Cuba that led to the Bay of Pigs fiasco.) Even with the understanding that over all of this hung the possibility of some overzealous fool on either side making a fatal blunder that could have led to a nuclear exchange, I hope that we have now reached a time when we can look

back and say, as I believe Mailer shows us, that all of the hugger-mugger, derring-do, tunnel digging, and various forms of cat and mouse the CIA and KGB engaged in were just so much silliness. We do so of course in the full recognition that much of this nonsense still goes on in the post-Soviet present.

At the end of *Harlot's Ghost*, Hubbard, using a fake passport, makes a second visit to Moscow to see whether Harlot has defected from the CIA to the KGB and thereby become an American version of the British spy Kim Philby. If this were found to be the case, it would of course be an enormous defeat and embarrassment for the CIA and a personal trauma for Hubbard as well, since Harlot was variously his surrogate father, mentor, and rival in romance. Here Hubbard's rage at the Soviet Union is in full cry when in contemplation of the bad coffee he will drink in the Metropol, he exclaims that it is an "[a]ccursed country of whole incapacities!" (982). What I take from *Harlot's Ghost* is that on one hand the US-USSR rivalry is still a good platform for the sort of mystery Mailer is creating in the novel, especially with regard to the fate of Harlot himself that is left unresolved. On the other hand, the middle aged, middle class Soviets are no longer really Red anymore, and the system they have created, however formidable militarily, is rent with glaring faults and failures, many of which are in plain sight for all to see.

In Mailer's description of the pre-revolutionary period in Russia in *The Castle in the Forest* there is virtually no mention of the Bolsheviks and other revolutionaries, for his interest is all in Nicholas, Alexandra, Rasputin, and his narrator Dieter's professed manipulations of events. Had Mailer finished the future Russian project he forecasts in *Castle*, he would certainly have dealt with the Reds. My own hunch is that he could not have resisted the temptation to give his own characterization of Lenin. Leaving aside such moot points, I find that Mailer, for all of his attention to politics on a national level, is greatly more interested in the inner workings of the personalities of his characters than in their politics.

And the same may be said of Hemingway, who largely on account of his time at the Hotel Gaylord in Madrid, where he met with a number of Soviet participants in the Spanish Civil War on the Republican side, was exceptionally well informed about what was going on in the Soviet Union of the late 1930s. He knew about the purges, especially of the Red Army's officer corps, including that of Tukachevsky. He also knew buzz words and phrases, such as "liquidated" and "enemy of the people," and he knew about political

commissars. I am not claiming that his Soviet sources revealed to Hemingway everything they knew about the darker sides of Soviet life, particularly Stalin's terror, for they would have been unlikely to risk being found out as Hemingway's source of such information since he was known to them as a famous writer and journalist. However, Hemingway, one way or another did crack some of the Soviets' seamier secrets, as we see in Robert Jordan's ruminations on the fate of the Russian poet Mayakovsky who, according to Jordan, was guilty of the sin of Bohemianism, but now that he is dead he is a "saint" (Hemingway 164). I understand this to mean that Hemingway was concerned about the fates of Soviet Russian writers and that Jordan's irony shows that he understood they were subject to the vagaries of the state's ever shifting attitudes toward them. I have to say here parenthetically that among the writers of his time Mayakovsky was certainly the reddest of them all, and his leftist proclivities outlasted even those of the regime itself. For all of Robert Jordan's political awareness and involvement, he is no party's man, and ultimately we judge him not on his politics but on his character. Likewise, I believe that we should judge Hemingway by the character of his prose and not his politics.

It seems clear that the red connections of Hemingway and Mailer are sometimes linked with their interest in things Russian and sometimes not. Moreover, both writers are bound up with Russian literature in a number of substantial, one might even say formative ways. To put it briefly, Hemingway was clearly well read in Chekhov and he also read authors of the Soviet period. As Clarence Brown points out, Hemingway's praise of Andrei Platonov to Soviet journalists helped spur the Soviets to resume publication of this writer of exceptional and original talent (116). It was during the 1960s that Hemingway experienced a surge of popularity among Russian readers. Indeed, I remember vividly a young man I met in Kiev in 1969 who had literally read all of Hemingway that was available in Russian translation at that time and who knew by heart the plots of many of his stories and novels. There is not space here adequately to describe what voracious readers of fiction Russians are except to say that they—from professional intellectuals to professional bus drivers—often know well not just the "classics" of their own literature but those of world literature, including of course Hemingway. Furthermore, some of the Russian writers who are often associated with a loose grouping from the 1960s called "Young Prose," for example Yury Kazakov, show the unmistakable hand of Hemingway in their manner of writing. So

we see that the relations between Hemingway and Russian writers form a two-way street.

I have made a case for what I consider to be Norman Mailer's seminal relationship with Russian literature in the 2009 edition of *The Mailer Review* (173–211), and some of his best known works, such as *An American Dream*, have been translated into Russian. A more thorough investigation of his reception in Russia, however, remains to be done.

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