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Guernica: The Wound in the Heart

Winston S. Carter

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The Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939 has long been forgotten by most people. At the time, however, many foreign observers believed they were witnessing the long anticipated titanic struggle between fascism and communism with democracy caught in the crossfire. Spaniards, of course, can never forget the war as the wounds inflicted by it have never completely healed. This book focuses on one of the most dramatic and tragic events of that conflict: the leveling of the sacred Basque town of Guernica on the late afternoon of 26 April 1937. Since then, historians have wrestled with the question of why the town was destroyed and by whom. Was it obliterated by a carpet bombing inflicted by the German Condor Legion as the Basques insist or torched by the Basques themselves who allegedly sought to throw the blame upon their Spanish Nationalist opponents? Although the destruction of Guernica occurred 78 years ago the incident still resonates throughout the Basque country. For Basques, Guernica is the wound in the heart that still separates them from their fellow countrymen who control Spain’s fortunes from Madrid. But for those who know little or nothing about the event, it is Pablo Picasso’s masterpiece they think of when Guernica is mentioned. His austere, black and grey painting has become the celebrated indictment of modern warfare, especially the bombing of civilian centers. As such, a copy of the painting guards the entrance to the United Nation’s Security Council chamber. Guernica was the first European town thoroughly leveled by incendiary and high explosive bombs which pointed the way to the frightful bombings of Warsaw, Rotterdam, Coventry, Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki during World War II. Guernica reminds us of the devastating potential of modern air power, which like Damocles’ sword still hangs ominously over a troubled and anxious world.

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