Conclusion
The Historical Significance of the Republic’s Defeat

When Franco declared an end to the Civil War, Catalonia had already lived under the yoke of occupation for almost two months, in a state of physical and material defeat and moral and spiritual devastation. In Catalonia, no event of the last two hundred years has had the catastrophic consequences of the Republican defeat. The loss of autonomy is only similar to what happened in 1714, when Catalonia lost its government after the War of Succession. None of the civil wars of the nineteenth century, none of the periods of absolutist reaction and repression could compare to Catalonia’s situation at that time. Even the harsh repression of the early dictatorship of Primo de Rivera (1923–30) looks tame compared to Franco’s new dictatorship. Beginning in 1939, Catalonia, and by extension all of Spain, saw its historical development suddenly interrupted. It would be extremely difficult to recover from this historical rupture.

Some authors have argued that the rupture really occurred in 1936, when the war began. It is true that the Civil War had a significant impact on the political, social, and economic life of Catalonia. It created the context for a multifaceted revolution that unleashed a process of profound transformations, including a move toward self-government that was so thorough that it broke through the limitations set by the 1932 Catalan Statute. But, at the same time, the transformations were a consequence of both the historical moment in Catalonia and the conditions inherited from the preceding period. One cannot say that Catalonia
improvised its 1936 revolution: the revolutionary aims of organising a new society, as utopian and un-realistic as they might seem now, had enjoyed a long tradition in the Catalan workers’ movement. And in 1936, even with all the problems, impediments, and contradictions, workers tried to put their ideas into practice. The Republican period before the war had been a time of creativity, with a militant and imaginative workers’ movement that, when it got the chance, made a good go of its historical opportunity.

Projects based on traditions from before the war made advances in other aspects of Catalan society as well. If Catalan women achieved new levels of emancipation, however minimal, it was because the women’s liberation movement had reached a significant level of organisation and self-consciousness. If the war created the context for an expansion of Catalan culture, it was because the Catalan culture movement – begun with the famous Renaixença (rebirth) a full century earlier! – was enjoying its greatest ever popularity. Even in the field of pedagogy, renovation was not beginning at ground zero, but was built instead on a movement that had begun in earnest at the beginning of the century. Finally, one cannot explain the level of self-government achieved by Catalonia between 1936 and 1937 without considering the national emancipation movement that had pushed for a transformation of the state, and liberties for Catalonia, ever since the Restoration (1874).

The war offered the historical occasion for the development of a series of transformations based on previously conceived projects. Only those suffering reprisals and persecution – a not insignificant sector of Catalan society – could consider the war years a historical exception, a parenthesis in time when their privileges, power, and liberty were interrupted. In 1939, however, their liberty, power, and privileges were returned with interest.

For most of Catalan society, the trauma of defeat, interrupting a decades-long historical trajectory, grew much larger than what might be called the trauma of the Civil War. With a coup de main – or perhaps, more accurately, a strike of the sword – the occupation army tried to erase Catalan history and build, with decrees and the force of arms, a new reality, a new state, and a new way of living, feeling, and thinking that were completely foreign to Catalonia.

The trauma of defeat began with the massive exodus of Spaniards and Catalans – four hundred thousand to five hundred thousand of them – who crossed the Catalan border into France. Approximately one hundred thousand of them were Catalan, and they included the entire political class, members of the Generalitat and political party and trade union leaders; almost all of the Catalan intelligentsia; what remained of the Republican Army and the workers, peasants, office employees, and shop owners who fought in it; and the civil population in all its diversity, who feared the announced reprisals (on 9 February, Franco