



## Recensión

A review of Fernández Soldevilla, G. and López Pérez, J.F.  
(2023) *Allí donde se queman libros. La violencia política contra las librerías (1962-2018)*. Madrid: Tecnos.

Mireya Toribio Medina

Investigadora doctoral del proyecto del Consejo Europeo de Investigación 'Urban Terrorism in Europe (2004-19): Remembering, Imagining, and Anticipating Violence', University of Birmingham.

'Where they burn books, they will also, in the end, burn human beings', wrote Heinrich Heine in 1823. The German poet and essayist verses referred to the events in the Spain of Isabella of Castile, but they also foreshadowed what was to follow in some of history's most gruesome episodes.

On 10 May 1933 a bonfire was lit on which thousands of volumes considered to be un-German were tossed. They had been seized from bookshops and libraries. It took place on Berlin's Opernplatz, located opposite the university. A cheering crowd gathered and around the flames stood young men in Nazi uniforms. Similar scenes were observed in other parts of the country that night, but that was not the worst of it: the Nazis would end up taking the lives of millions of human beings who, according to the same gruesome criteria, did not fit their concept of 'German' either. Similar developments would take place in other regions and in diverse political environments, such as Stalin's USSR, the Bosnian genocide or the jihadist seizure of Timbuktu in 2012. In the course of the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, libraries, whose content and symbolism nurture Ukrainian heritage, have also been targeted. Dictatorial repression, acts of war, genocide or terrorism are atrocious forms of violence that often begin with the destruction of culture.

Violent bibliophobia has likewise been dreadfully prolific in Spain. If during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the early stages of the following dictatorship (1939-1975) certain books and writers were persecuted; the 1960s and, with particular virulence, the 1970s were the scene of attacks on bookshops and those associated with them –namely booksellers, publishers or



distributors—. This brutality was not limited to a single ideology. Far-right assaults were then joined by those of the far-left and the terrorist organisation ETA. Attacks on the written word were also on these occasions the overture to episodes of violence against people. Between 1960 and 2023, terrorism claimed more than 1,450 fatalities in the country.

Gaizka Fernández Soldevilla –historian and Head of Research at the Memorial Centre for Victims of Terrorism (Vitoria, Basque Country, Spain)– and Juan Francisco López Pérez –historian– have recorded 225 attacks against the book scene in Spain between 1962 and 2018. This figure is just a prelude to the stories that lie behind. It is in those attacks and, most importantly, in their underlying accounts that the authors immerse us in their latest essay, which takes as its title the prophetic verses of Heine: *Allí donde se queman libros. La violencia política contra las librerías (1962-2018)* [Where books are burned. Political violence against bookshops (1962-2018)] (Tecnos, 2023).

While doing so, this work offers a perfect picture of the historical and political events that the country underwent over that period of time. Fernández and López painstakingly interweave a chronicle of intolerance in Spain, from one attack on culture to another, from the times of the Francoist dictatorship to the present day. It is precisely through the thread of Spain's recent history that it becomes possible to grasp the extent of the rage endured by the literary sector on the part of all sorts of fanatics who have tried to destroy what they feared most: ideas different from their own.

Hence, this chronicle reveals how extreme right-wing and vigilante terrorism, but also that of ETA and its sympathisers along with extreme left-wing groups relentlessly assaulted these sites of culture armed with bats, paint, Molotov cocktails, petrol, flames, bombs and bullets. Not one of them is recorded as ever having taken a book. They managed to inflict material and economic damage, endangered businesses and jobs and tried to instil fear in those who wrote, made, sold and read books. Fear, however, as these historians prove, did not silence their words, nor did it close their doors.

As is often the case, in this field too, extremes meet. The authors take the example of *Laqum* (San Sebastian, Basque Country, Spain), the bookshop which suffered the desperate wrath of extreme right-wing groups and individuals, first, and of ETA and its acolytes, later. The premises suffered multiple attacks and, eventually, one of its booksellers was shot by a member of ETA. Violence almost put an end to the store, but the generosity of friends and citizens together with the determination of the booksellers kept it going.

The worst brought about the best. Much like the stories of those who in Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* dedicated themselves to



memorising literary works in order to save them from destruction, violence against culture triggered numerous displays of solidarity. Alongside the stories of fanatics of all hues who futilely tried to eliminate certain ideas, stories of generous individuals coexist. As Fernández and López recount, good instances are the citizens who gathered at the doors of bookshops to buy damaged volumes, the Francoist politicians who, against all odds, pledged to protect the trade, or the case of the policemen who, at a time of upheaval, were capable of gestures such as spending a whole night reading inside a bookshop with a smashed window to protect it from further damage.

This feature endured across the book sector. On 11 March 2004, in the aftermath of the Madrid train bombings that took the lives of 192 people and wounded 1.840, the bookshop Rafael Alberti (Madrid, Spain) filled its window with poetry in homage and solidarity with the victims of the heinous attack. It did so exactly twenty-seven *elevenths of March* after the attack that the shop suffered on the same date but in 1977 and which ended with the ultra-right-wing attackers and members of the police clashing with gunfire outside the establishment. That was just one of many attacks targeting that bookshop that are reported in this book.

Nevertheless, Fernández and López's work is not only a well documented collection of the sterile attempts by the totalitarian forces to put an end to a large part of the cultural scene in Spain's recent history and of the reactions provoked by their actions. Nor is it solely the history of the country in the light of the violence against the book trade. It is above all a beautiful tribute to those who loved and cared for literature and, in particular, to booksellers. As the authors remark, in spite of those who feared paper and only spoke out by force, bookshops continued to open their doors day after day.

