

Memoir

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Lester Ziffren and the road to war in Spain

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Abstract

On the night of 17 July 1936, Lester Ziffren, the United Press correspondent in Madrid, broke the news of Franco's uprising. Within 36 hours the Spanish civil war had begun. Ziffren had been the UP representative for three years. During that time his diaries, radio broadcasts and articles plotted the gathering political crisis. These documents and the author's conversations with him tell the story of a young journalist, imbued with his principles of getting to the objective truth, who level-headedly reported on a country in which there was increasingly no middle ground, and who moved from the Hemingway circle of artists and bull-fighters to the political elite and to a social life spent among the grandes. He vividly describes the road to war through industrial and political conflict, and as a correspondent he reported on the horror of modern warfare while not being allowed to lose sight of the human cost.

Keywords

Ziffren
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On July 12, 1933, Lester Ziffren, a 27-year old journalist from Rock Island, Illinois, arrived in Madrid as the new United Press (UP) correspondent. Spain is a backwater, he thought, of interest largely to UP's biggest client in South America, *La Prensa*.¹

As a journalist he was passionate about being objective, getting to the truth and getting the story out. These qualities came together on the night of July 17, 1936. With all communications from Morocco cut off and no private telephone calls allowed in Madrid, Ziff (as his friends called him) would nevertheless be the journalist who broke the news to the outside world of Franco's uprising.

During the three and a half years that he was in Spain, Ziff moved in various circles – the bullfighting and artistic crowd he first met through Ernest Hemingway, the grandes he met up with in nightclubs and the people he met as a 'spare man' at the American Embassy. All this fed into his writing. As he told me, 'I had sympathy for the government, trying to correct old abuses, but they did the same. It was my disillusionment.' But he remained a democrat who felt that it was the elected government that had legitimacy.

This account has been written from his unpublished diaries, from articles that appeared at the time, from the transcripts of his radio broadcasts

1 The following account is constructed entirely on the basis of Lester Ziffren's private papers. These consist of his personal diaries from July 1933 through 1937, the narrative diary he kept from July 1936 to December 1936, articles he wrote in 1936 and 1937, transcripts of his EAQ radio broadcasts in 1933 and in June 1936, journalist notes he made in December 1936 and the author's conversations with him since 1999. It does not claim to represent anything other than his own view of events, both at the time and looking backward.

(now at Stanford's Hoover Institution) and from conversations with him. Virtually none of these have been tapped so far by historians. It marks both the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the civil war and Lester Ziffren's 100th birthday, which I attended on April 30, 2006. It is his story.

'What I got out of journalism school,' he recalls, 'was a respect for the truth. They taught us we had an obligation to be as honest and truthful as we could be. We had a responsibility to the public.' It was a set of principles that he passed on to his Madrid team, which included a Marxist, a Trotskyite, a republican and a monarchist. 'All I want from you guys is an honest report', he would tell them, 'How you see, how you interpret, what's happened. All I wanted was honesty, and I got it'.

Less than two months after he arrived, he managed to track down the visiting Ernest Hemingway, who was there with his wife Pauline for the bullfighting season, staying in a small hotel in the area where the bullfighting fans would gather. Hemingway took a great liking to him and for the next several weeks Ziff was part of the writer's circle. Together with the Brooklyn-born bullfighter Sidney Franklin, Hemingway transformed his hotel room into a makeshift arena to teach Ziff the rudiments of the cape and the muleta. Ziff carried on practising in the street, using the cruising taxis as substitute bulls. He and Hemingway would go to the Alvarez bar where they 'would strip and enjoy fried shrimp and fresh "bola" cheese washed down with beer', as he later remembered in his diary.

After the Hemingways left in October, a correspondence between the men began. There was advice about the fine points of bullfighting:

For God's sake see Gallo every time you can and watch everything he does. His cape work doesn't mean anything in the *veronica* except to show you how they did it in the old days. Arms high, giving the bull lots of *salida*. But those *quites* that he does with *serpentin*as and his muleta is wonderful.

At Hemingway's urging, Ziff published an article in the new magazine *Esquire* about the fighter Belmonte. 'Damn glad to hear from you', Hemingway wrote on the way home from safari in Kenya in 1934, where he bragged:

I shot the best I've ever—got 3 lion, buffalo, rhino, 2 Kudu and 18 other things with one shot apiece. You are only allowed 2 lions so don't put things in the paper because we want to go back and the game warden has a clipping service.

Politics was one subject he does not recall Hemingway discussing, but as he later noted, 'Politics is Spain's great national occupation'. He learned this almost immediately. 'Police Sunday and Monday detained 500 Spain-wide

alleged Fascist-Syndicalist plot' he noted in his diary, 12 days after he arrived in Madrid in 1933. The Left-dominated government was still in power, but on 19 November 1933 the Republican Right won the new elections. As he broadcast at the time, over 200 of the old deputies lost their seats, including, 'philosophers, professors, physicians, jurists, writers and other intellectuals' (starting with Ortega y Gasset) 'who had aided in transforming Spain into a republic'. There was however no political peace, and Ziff's diary notes from time to time the declarations of the three stages of emergency measures connected with public order: A state of prevention (prohibiting among other things mass meetings), a state of alarm, and martial law. . . .

On 5 October 1934, a short-lived revolutionary strike began. That day, the authorities arrested Luis Quintanilla, the artist who had raised the republican flag at the Royal Palace on 13 April 1931. Ziff had met him through Hemingway in the autumn of 1933 and had been entrusted by Hemingway to tell the artist that the writer was organising a show of Quintanilla's etchings in New York. Ziff used to visit Quintanilla in prison with a smuggled bottle of whisky. On 6 March 1935 Ziff's diary noted that martial law had been extended for 30 days in Madrid and elsewhere but the round of dances and parties of the Carnival season went ahead regardless.

In time, Ziff got to know all the nightclubs, which were an excellent source of information. Bakanik, run by a German who was thought to be a spy, catered to the sons and daughters of the aristocrats – it was one of the few places where the daughters could go without much challenge – and for a journalist was a good clearing house: 'if you asked someone something and they didn't know, they would ask someone who did', he later mused. He would meet his aristocratic friends, Jaime, Duke of Arion and the Marquis of Portugalete, who would disappear from time to time with some guitarists to immerse himself in flamenco. In addition he met the famous people who came through Madrid: Douglas Fairbanks, William Randolph Hearst, New York's former Mayor Jimmy Walker, Anna Mae Wong, and the actress Eleanor Boardman and her French husband, the director Harry d'Arrast, who had introduced him to Belmonte. Ziff was also a friend of Domingo Ortega's, and when the American writer and photographer, Carl Van Vechten, presented himself at Ziff's office and said he wanted to photograph a bullfighter, he took him to Ortega's farm, where Ziff had tried his own luck in the arena.

Ziff's knack for being liked and trusted went beyond Hemingway. He was a favourite of the American ambassador, Claude Bowers, a former newspaperman and Roosevelt appointee who infuriated the State Department by taking issues straight to the President. Ziff was the regular 'spare man at dinner' at the Embassy and was invited to have tea with the ambassador every week. He was welcomed by Count Romanones, the grandee who had several times been prime minister during the monarchy. Ziff explained to his listeners in 1933 that Romanones rejected the offer of a banquet in his honour by monarchical youths on the basis that the duty

of monarchists was instead 'to know how to wait resignedly'. Romanones wore a complicated system of hearing aids, which were judiciously turned off for certain people; they were left on for Ziff.

From September 1933, Ziff began a nightly broadcast on EAQ to the United States, called Spain Day by Day, noting both political and personal stories. At the time he recorded what his working day was like. He began by reading Madrid's seven morning newspapers and covering the various embassies and consulates and other news centres. In the afternoon he attended the Cortes (Government confided, Cortes closed until October 1. Wild debate – fist fights – guns' he noted in his diary on 4 July 1934). At 6 pm, he got down to work, after cabling a general story to *La Prensa*. Mondays were slow news days; Sundays were better since bullfights, football games and mass meetings took place then. From October 1934 his broadcasts became subject to censorship. This meant that after writing out the text in English, he had to produce a parallel text in Spanish for the censor to read by 9 pm. From the reply to that he made the corresponding blue pencil alterations in the English text. The censor was not always consistent, and an item could be crossed out in one place but left in when referred to in different words further down the page.

The count down to war began on 17 February 1936 when the Left won a fresh round of elections. In May 1936, in *Current History* ('Spain in Upheaval') Ziff explained more graphically than in his journalism what the new situation was:

Liberal and labor forces which gave Spain her "democratic Republic of workers" five years ago are again back in the shaky saddle of power, determinedly intent on applying their revolutionary program to the limit. The laborites trust the road will lead to Moscow and the second Soviet state in Europe.

The Popular Front was a 'strange alliance' of 'bourgeois groups leagued with the very parties whose policy is directed toward their destruction'. The Socialist Party under Francisco Largo Caballero (the 'Spanish Lenin'), promised during the election campaign to 'continue on our path until we achieve social renovation'. 'Desiring freedom of movement and decision' they took no ministries in the government, but promised to support the Cabinet 'as long as the latter met with their approval'. On the other extreme, he quoted the right-wing leader, Jose Calvo Sotelo, as having said, 'democracy in Spain will always led inevitably to Communism'. 'The two camps, uncompromising in their ambitions, maintain the constant menace of civil war'. The impetuous, sentimental, passionate-blooded Spaniard seems unable to find a middle course'. As he bluntly told me, 'there was a political killing every night', or at least it felt like that. He went further when recalling the early days of the war: 'The Spaniard seems to possess a complete disregard for life. They believe a man is measured by his courage and indifference to injury or death. It is the brave

bull-fighter who wins the most contracts.' He experienced some of this first hand. When the President of Catalonia visited the UP offices, which were a block away from the Cortes, someone outside fired machine guns at the windows. No one was hurt. Ziff's diary, interspersed with personal matters, notes the imposition of martial law in Valencia (February 18), church burnings in Madrid (March 14), firing on a civil guard funeral (April 16), general strike (April 17), more church burnings (May 4), and military insubordination at Alcalá de Henares (May 18).

In May, while in the nightclub, *Boite*, he noticed two young American women. Lillian Wurtzel, whose father, Sol, was a producer at Twentieth Century-Fox, had come to Madrid in pursuit of Jose López Rubio, a playwright and friend of Lorca's. Ziff was attracted to her companion and first cousin, Edythe, whose father, Harry, was agent to director John Ford. Over the next week he saw Edythe every day. After she left, she wrote urging him to come home to the United States.

The transcripts of Ziff's broadcasts in June 1936 are dominated by news of industrial and political unrest. On June 28 Galicia held a plebiscite to decide whether to become an autonomous region. Basilio Alvarez, the Galician nationalist politician and later an ally of Lerroux, commented on the successful vote: 'my country, which has been on its knees from the time of its submission to the Catholic kings to the coming of the Second Republic has arisen again to begin a new life'. When a cache of false civil guard uniforms and a quantity of arms and ammunition were found on June 11, Alvaro de Albornoz, a prominent left wing deputy, declared 'the government must lead the revolution, not be towed by it'.

On June 12 he broadcast in chilling language about fighting in Malaga:

Four dead and four known wounded whereof two critically constituted the balance sheet of the three days warfare between socialists and communists on one side and syndicalists on the other. The syndicalists killed one communist and one socialist while the socialists and communists murdered one syndicalist. The other victim was a girl who was hit by a stray bullet. The Marxists today distributed a manifesto in which they branded traitors those who kill proprietors and employers in the name of the syndicalists. The manifesto added that the assassins were under orders from fascist elements. The civil governor, on orders from the Minister of Interior, has issued an order for the immediate surrender of all firearms by those persons having licenses to own them. Pedestrians are being frisked by police. In order to demonstrate that the authorities are not partial to anyone, the governor ordered the reopening of the syndicalist headquarters. As revenge for the killing of a syndicalist today, the syndicalists tried to stop traffic by sniping at auto buses.

By June 16 there were 100,000 building workers on strike in Madrid along with lift operators, and the Asturias miners were still out. That evening, the right-wing deputies in the Cortes put forward a proposition

that the government end 'the state of subversion Spain is living in'. Ziff broadcast a summary of the debate. He was not allowed to relate what was said by the right-wing deputy Gil Robles, who listed the instances of anarchy since the election in February and alleged that members of the Popular Front had provoked them in order to show that capitalism was bankrupt. Neither could he broadcast the prescient words of the fascist-leaning rightist deputy José Calvo Sotelo who said that the government was on the verge of death. Although 'frequently interrupted by uproar from the popular front benches' (according to Ziff's text), he claimed that any military man 'who would not defend Spain against anarchy would be an imbecile or mad'.

What was broadcast was the lament of Enrique de Francisco of the Socialist Party, that the government 'has not used its emergency powers "against rightists in order to avoid the causes of the deeds which so pains Sr. Robles. It was "the employer class [which] has all the blame because it makes the workers desperate"'. Santiago Casares Quiroga, the Prime Minister, also blamed the disorders on the policies of the Right. Ziff's summary went thus: 'he declared a vexed people, persecuted and tortured, became filled with hate and the frenzy of destruction'. He then quoted Casares Quiroga as saying, 'although I do not believe it will occur, if anything of a military character occurs, I make Calvo Sotelo responsible before Parliament, Calvo Sotelo who pretends to support some personality of the Army with dictatorial objectives' . . .

The next day, white-collar workers struck in Barcelona, affecting all shops, offices and grocery stores. The censor cut from the broadcast the news that the police 'had to intervene in the food markets as the vegetable and fruit salesmen, taking advantage of the situation, increased their prices fifty percent and indignant shoppers proceeded to destroy their booths.' There was a general strike in Cadiz. Madrid newspapers were 'sold under the protection of storm guards' and thirteen shopkeepers were fined one thousand pesetas each for failing to open their establishments when ordered to do so. Also censored was the story of a general strike in Valladolid, called in protest at the shooting of a workman, which interrupted train services. On June 30, the 56-day lift operators strike was settled, which had caused 20,000 out of 25,000 lifts to be out of action.

The June 30 radio broadcast quoted the President of the Cortes, Diego Martínez Barrio, as appealing to the defeated rightists to admit their defeat, and to the leftists to govern for the nation: Ziff reported him saying, 'the defeated in the political battles—and to them the present state of inquietude is fundamentally due—have the obligation of supporting the winners and the right to seek recovery of power by pacific and legal means. The obligation of the victors is to intelligently administrate their victory in the service of and devotion to the country; the people "cannot live in a state of constant insurrection and inquietude"'.

Meanwhile the government refused funding to allow Spanish athletes to attend the Olympics in Berlin scheduled for July. An alternative 'popular Olympiad' was to be organised in Barcelona, with delegates from 13 countries,

including Palestine, Algeria, and Russia, and with regional folk song and dance contests to fill in the moments between the sporting activities. The day's society gossip was that Domingo Ortega, Ziff's friend and the country's highest paid matador and a former stable boy, was to marry the daughter of the Marquis of Amboage, the first time a bullfighter had married into a titled family. And an aristocratic young woman named María Luisa Inchausti was imprisoned for shouting insults at the recently elected President Azaña as he drove past her home on his way to lunch at the French Embassy.

On July 5, Ziff went to Toledo with Ambassador Bowers for the ceremony of dedicating the newly renovated telephone building. There was a banquet afterwards at the home of the former mayor, Gregorio Ledesma, at which the notable men of the city, both republican and anti-republican sat down together at the same table for the last time. Before the end of the month, Toledo would become a battlefield.

'Lt. José Castillo [an Assault Guard] killed, 10 pm.' Ziff noted in his diary on July 12, adding later that Castillo used to drill the socialist youth militarily. That day Ziff went to a bullfight. After dinner he went to two nightclubs, accompanied by a visiting anti-Popular Front Englishman, Rupert Belleville, and the daughter of the United States military attaché, Jeanette Fuqua. The next day, July 13, assault guards went to the house of José Calvo Sotelo, took him outside, and killed him. The gun formed part of an exhibition on the Spanish civil war at the Imperial War Museum in 2001. Ziff rang Ambassador Bowers to enquire into the truth of a right wing rumour that he had been held up by communists. On July 15, Ziff noted that the State of alarm was extended for 30 days.

In a review of the year in December 1936, Ziff connected the execution with the uprising: 'monarchists fascists rightists promised avenge his death. Jose Maria Gil Robles pronounced threats reprisals in parliament and left for France.' On the evening of July 17, Ziff went into Chicote's night club for a shot of vodka before his broadcast. His contacts with the grandees now paid off. He ran into Romanones' son, the Marquis of Bollarque. 'Have you heard the news?' he said to Ziff, 'What news?' 'It's started'. What had started was Franco's uprising in Morocco. Just before his broadcast, Ziff's office rang to say that all telegraphic and telephonic communications with the rest of Spain and the outside world had been cut.

Ziff went back to the office. No one in official circles would confirm the report. He knew that to break the news to the world would be committing a crime by violating Government censorship. At 10.45 pm, he tracked down Fred Caldwell, the managing director of the Spanish National Telephone Company, at the Ritz Hotel, where he happened to be in the gents' toilet before dinner. Caldwell confirmed that communications had been cut off with Morocco and that it looked as if there was an insurrection. There were no private inter-urban or international calls and all press messages would have to be submitted to the censor who would listen in on all calls.

Ziff decided to go with the story but how would he get the news out? He had a man who knew someone in government communications, so

they went to the Ministry of Communications 'to see whether Bernardo Giner de los Ríos will recall old favors and help us out', as Ziff recorded, 'Giner de los Ríos came through swell, but it was a long pull'. It was two hours before they could get through to London with 'official confirmation of the revolt' as he noted in his diary. In the annals of journalistic lore there is recorded the coded cable Ziff sent to United Press in London, in which the first letter of each word spelled out the message, 'Melilla foreign legion revolted martial law declared' (it began 'Mothers everlasting lingering illness likely laryngitis aunt flora ought return even if goes north'). He was the first with the news. At 2 pm on the 18th the Government admitted to the uprising. The next day Prime Minister Casares Quiroga resigned. Cortes President Martínez Barrio, who had told the Right three weeks before to seek recovery of power only by peaceful means, was appointed in his place but was unable to form a government and was in turn replaced by a fellow member of Unión Republicana, José Giral.

For the next five months Ziff was a war correspondent. As he wrote the next year in *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 'For the first time in newspaper history, journalists felt the insecurity and chills which come to residents of a besieged city, ruthlessly torn to pieces day and night by relentless cannonading and bombing' 'The battlefield [from November 7] was only ten blocks away'. Earlier 'I missed being taken prisoner only because a lone militia man returning along a deserted road warned me that I was heading for Rebel territory'. As he explained in an article in *Current History* in April 1937, with coal from the Asturias mines cut off from Madrid, there was almost no heat. The foreign journalists ate in their overcoats, and dined every day off beans, lentils, cauliflower, pickled sardines 'of unknown age', potatoes, cakes and fruit. The residents took to eating dinner at 7.30 or 8 pm, 'since bed was about the only warm place in any home, most residents were there by 9', adding 'The fatalistic philosophy of the matador seems to have pervaded all Madrid'.

In October he scored a coup by getting an interview with President Azaña, the first American journalist to do so since he had become president the previous June. 'The rebel radio rumours that Azaña had scrambled provided me with an excuse', Ziff noted in his diary:

and I recalled that a Unipresser [UP reporter] was the first American to interview Stalin because he took advantage of a Riga report that the Soviet dictator had been assassinated. [I] insisted that the only way to convince the world at large that Azaña was staying in Madrid was for me to see him personally. It worked.

It was a brief interview; Ziff noted that the President 'answered questions with a shrug of his shoulders or a wave of his hand or a "bah"'. His despatch quoted him as saying 'The government is fighting for political liberty. We are not fighting for communism or socialism. What will come after victory is up to parliament. I make no predictions.'

After Federico García Lorca was murdered, his friend José López Rubio asked for help in getting out, and Ziff arranged for Edythe's uncle, the producer Sol Wurtzel to write a letter offering him a job in Hollywood so that he would get a visa. Ziff's diary notes that early in October he had to get his UP colleague Emilio Herrero out of gaol after his arrest on the Madrid-Toledo highway 'for asking questions but more probably because he at one time was press bureau chief of the former President, Niceto Alcalá Zamora. His release was secured thanks 'to the timely intervention of Luis Rubio Hidalgo, chief of the foreign ministry censorship bureau, and General Asensio, chief of the army general staff. I also secured the aid of about six cabinet ministers to whom I spoke personally.' After his release, following 24 hours 'in the stinking cellars of the police headquarters', Asensio invited Herrero to dinner at the war office.

On only one night, in December, was Ziff ever out of touch with the UP office in London: While having dinner in a bar he encountered a Swedish prostitute and spent the night with her. The next morning he was told by his office that London had been trying urgently to reach him. Franco was displeased at some of his despatches emphasising the failure of his intelligence service – on the crucial night in November that the Government had left Madrid for Valencia, Ziff believed that Franco could have walked into the city, and said so. Franco now threatened that when he did take Madrid, he would take care of Ziffren: 'jail or worse'. United Press left it to him to decide what to do. Ziff took the view that it would compromise his impartiality as a journalist if he were personally interested in Madrid not falling; he decided to leave. By good luck, he was able to join the convoy, which was taking the Mexican Ambassador to the French border.

He was in Paris for Christmas and the New Year, but he still filed an end of year review, in cable form:

... political situation beginning 1936 characterised frequent cabinet crises political uncertainty came to head February when republican bourgeois parties joined hands Marxist forces who far outnumbered republicans in first popular front world political history. Self satisfaction overconfidence jealousy between leaders resulted unexpectedly rightists downfall bringing popular front controlled parliament with return power determined not permit rightists again gain upper hand leftists pushed through parliamentary measures intended cripple opponents ... [Q]uiroga failed show expected authority vision, although warned repeatedly military plotting he failed to take steps break up conspiracy before overlateffsimple revolution turned country into bloodthirsty madhouse aerial bombardments reduce cities hamlets to shambles ... [F]ranco almost had city November with [C]aballero government fled but something went wrong even if Madrid holds out seems probably war go on many months doubtful whether surrender or compromise possible because both sides have too much lose if other wins.

He reached London on 6 January 1937. He lunched with Claud Cockburn's wife, Jean, who had been in Spain in the autumn and who

tried without success to recruit Ziff to the Communist Party. Rupert Belleville arranged dinner at White's with the Secretary of State for War, Duff Cooper. Belleville hoped that Ziff would join him in supporting Franco. Instead, he asked Cooper why the western countries were not selling arms to the democratically elected government. It was an awkward moment and Cooper did not reply.

For the moment without a job, Ziff went back to the United States, but found life in Rock Island with his family not really tolerable. 'I couldn't adjust myself to normalcy'. In February, Hemingway wrote. He was going now to Spain and asked advice on what clothes he needed and how much money he needed. 'Do you suppose the rebs [sic] would shoot me [if they took Madrid] for having staked the other boys to ambulances? I don't mind the ordinary chances but would hate like hell to get executed'. He urged Ziff to come down to Florida and to see meet his wife Pauline Hemingway.

Instead, he went to Los Angeles. Within a month he was on the payroll of Twentieth Century Fox as a screenwriter, a career best known for the scripts of the Charlie Chan movies. On 21 May 1937, Ziff and Edythe were married.

The honeymoon was in Mexico. The local UP man said that the exiled Leon Trotsky wanted to meet him, and so Ziff took a day off from his honeymoon to talk – or rather, listen – to the Russian revolutionary. Ziff asked him why the western powers did not help the republican government and was told that they were afraid of a world war and were not prepared, whereas Germany and Italy *were* prepared.

When war broke out, the American Ambassadors in South America were told that they must have a public relations officer to counter the influx of pro-Axis propaganda. Claude Bowers was now ambassador to Chile and said that if he had to have anyone, he would have Lester Ziffren. He became head of the Chile Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs. In due course, he would return to the State Department, first to Bogota and then to Santiago, where he moved on to work for Braden Copper. Since 1961 he has lived in New York.

When he arrived in France in December 1936, as he later described it, 'a severe physical reaction set in. I saw persons living calmly, eating tranquilly and as much as they desired, free from the fear of bombs and bullets . . . began to suffer from nightmares. My dreams were of horrors. I used to wake several times a night in a cold sweat. If I could sleep four hours I was fortunate.' Seventy years later, his memories of Spain are still vivid. His career proved though, that he could feel deeply about everything going on around him while level-headedly reporting it at the time. It remains a unique record.

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