

## **LORD OF ALL THE DEAD**

(JAVIER CERCAS)

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Years ago, I lived in Budapest with an elderly Hungarian relative, my grandfather's cousin. She had lived through World War II as a young woman. One day, as we were eating lunch, she reminisced about the Russian invasion and conquest of Hungary in 1945, which she survived. She looked at me and said (in Hungarian), "Always remember, when you are grown and are a powerful man, that war is a terrible thing." We all know this, but it is easy to forget the personal impact of war—both on soldiers and on everyone else in a society. This uneven book is a reminder of those costs, and an opportunity to ponder when they are worth paying, as civil war slouches ever closer to us.

I've been on a Spanish Civil War kick for some time now. No points for guessing why. This is the first book on modern Spain that I have read, however. Well, it's half about modern Spain. It is an odd book, by an author apparently famous in Spain, Javier Cercas. Half of it is about Cercas, his family, his emotional states, and his quest to explore the brief life of his great uncle, Manuel Mena, a soldier who died in the Nationalist cause. The other half is about Mena himself, where Cercas teases what little definite history exists into a narrative, and then extends the narrative to structural failure by wishful thinking that Mena was really not who he was. These two halves repeatedly cross over into each other, in a choppy narrative that contains entirely too much navel-gazing by Cercas about himself. But hey, it's his book, and maybe this is what sells in Spain.

*Lord of All the Dead* is tightly focused on the village in which Mena lived and in which Cercas was born, and in which their extended family all lived, until mostly leaving in the 1960s, during the massive economic boom brought about by Francisco Franco in the third act of his life, as dictator of Spain for nearly forty years. That village is called Ibahernando; it lies in the west of Spain, in Extremadura, always an impoverished, rural province. (Fleeing from there to places where one can make money has a long pedigree—many of the most famous conquerors of the New World came from Extremadura, including Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro.) In Cercas's description, it is today nearly empty

and irrelevant to the nation as a whole, though I can't tell if that's true. It would certainly not be surprising, in these days of urbanization and plummeting populations.

We do not learn until near the end of the book why the title, though I should have caught it on my own. It comes from the famous response given by the shade of Achilles, asked by Odysseus how it goes in the afterlife. Achilles responds that he would rather be a penniless farmer than lord of all the dead. Although this book is framed as an exploration of the life of Mena, as the title shows it is really an attempt by Cercas to rewrite his sacrifice as a tragic waste, in contradiction to what Mena himself very obviously thought. What Cercas is selling is that although Mena, and many of his relatives, saw Mena's death as a *kalos thanatos*, a perfect death, really it was stupid, not just because it was a young man's in war, but most of all because he was ignorant of his actual interests, which, Cercas lectures us over and over, as with everyone in Ibahernando, lay entirely with the Republicans, for whom they all would have been fighting if they had had any sense. Yes, this is really his claim.

We will get later to the interests of the villagers. I am not going to discuss the whys and wherefores of the Spanish Civil War; I have already done that elsewhere. What I'd like to explore is two things. First, what drives civil conflict in small polities far from the centers of power? Second, ignoring Cercas's attempts to impose his own views on Manuel Mena, at what point should a society be willing to sacrifice its young men in battle, and its young women at home if they lose to the wrong adversary, along with much else, to a cause? Or, put another way, at what point should the costs my own aunt related be borne?

For the most part, I am therefore going to ignore that Cercas unreflectingly parrots standard left-wing propaganda about the war, which is doubtless the norm for his social class and standing in Spain today. In this view, the Spanish Republic brought low by Franco was a pure and wonderful democracy that came to power by democratic means. It represented all Spain. It committed no wrongs, except a few minor excesses in response to right-wing rebellion. Cercas says never a word about the massive violence and atrocities against conservatives and the Church that resulted in Franco's entirely rational and moral rebellion against an illegitimate Communist-dominated regime. (Cercas delicately refers to violence and atrocities encouraged and permitted

under the Republic as “confrontations produced by the Republic’s efforts to modernize the country.”) Words in this book are carefully chosen for propaganda effect; the word “Hitler” appears early and often attached to Franco; the words “Stalin” and “Soviet Union” do not appear a single time anywhere. I assume all this is mainline modern Spanish leftism. To be fair, it’s not over the top, not like Communist apologists such as Paul Preston. It’s more like Cercas has just absorbed the party line and regurgitates it as he goes along, focused primarily on creating an alternative history of his uncle that will be palatable to his social circle.

The story of Mena is fairly straightforward, though Cercas manages to make it somewhat difficult to follow by making the story not about Mena, but about his own gradual unearthing of facts about Mena. He couples this with endless maundering about his own emotions as they relate to Mena and to the rest of his family. Run-on sentences and the use of directly translated Spanish idioms making little sense in English do not contribute, nor does a lot of talk about his filmmaker friend whose wife left him for Viggo Mortensen, though that’s a little bit amusing. She probably left him because he had annoying friends like Cercas.

I will impose some order on the narrative. The core figure in Cercas’s exploration is his own mother, still alive and a major character in this book. She was eight years younger than her uncle, Mena, her father’s brother, to whom she was very close. In a village community of this type, large families were the norm at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the families tended to intermarry, with second cousins marrying each other. We forget, in these days of sad wine aunts and atomization, that this kind of tangled, extended-family web used to be the norm for most people. Thus, through his mother Cercas is introduced to all those still alive who can shed light on Mena’s life. Other than in the village, where a main street is named after him, nobody at all remembers Mena.

Starting with his mother, Cercas gradually expands his circle of interlocutors. He does not talk to a single person who supported Franco or the Falange. Rather, he talks to elderly leftists, none his relatives, and to younger leftists who are all cousins of one type or another, most of all one who is today a socialist delegate to the European Parliament. This is also bizarre, for in his own telling everyone was a Francoist until the 1970s, yet Cercas does not offer a single word from anyone in support of any Right political position. He talks of “Francoist families” and how they

still remember Mena's funeral, but does not talk to any of them. Rather, his project is to signal to his readership the illegitimacy of any support for Franco, so it is no surprise that he offers no Francoist perspectives. Instead, he offers the unconditional self-abasement of a Maoist struggle session. I lost track of the innumerable times Cercas refers to Mena's, and his extended family's, "shame" and "dishonour," while never once specifying in what way they were shamed and dishonored. (On one page the words show up eight times, along with an incomprehensible reference to the "defeats" of his shamed ancestors, who, after all, won the war.) I can only assume that in the left-wing circles in modern Spain in which Cercas lives and breathes, it is presumed that any connection, no matter how faint, to Francoism is somehow shameful and dishonorable. His social class, represented by his cuckold filmmaker friend, tells him as an established fact that opposing the Communists was "a mistaken cause" and "unjust." None of this is true, and Cercas even tells us the cliché that victors write the histories, ignoring the obvious falsity of that here.

But let's turn to Mena. It is a short enough story. When the time for political choosing came, Mena was, like many young men, attracted to the Falange, with its blend of traditionalism and modernism. Cercas unearths some speeches written by him for delivery to the local Falange youth group, which are standard boilerplate. When the war broke out in 1936, Mena volunteered, at age seventeen. He was made a second lieutenant, in the Ifni Riflemen, a regiment of the *Regulares* (mainly Moroccan enlisted men with Spanish officers) and fought in several battles. He was killed in 1938, at age nineteen, at the Battle of the Ebro, in Catalonia, shot in the abdomen. His body was brought back to Ibahernando and buried, an event of great significance in the village, and one of the defining events of Mena's mother's life—although, strangely, Cercas never asks her any of her opinions, just for the facts.

Cercas is very focused on the political situation in Ibahernando, and as we will see, it is through this prism that he interprets the meaning of Mena's life. I find this fascinating, because it says much about politics outside the centers of power, once you strip away the distortions Cercas creates while twisting history to fit into his frame. The author views the politics of the 1920s and the 1930s in Ibahernando through a tired Marxist lens. In Cercas's telling, most of the land in Ibahernando was

owned by absentee landlords, nobles of one sort or another, who lived in Madrid. Until a few decades before the war, everyone was essentially a serf who worked the land. But at some point, enterprising farmers began renting land from the nobles, and even were able, after some time, to own a modest amount of land. In other words, they became what Stalin called *kulaks*—farmers a little better off than their neighbors, as a result of their own initiative and hard work. Others remained landless farm laborers or tenant farmers. Cercas tells us this introduced class stratification into Ibahernando, and that rather than being united against their real oppressors, the absentee landlords, a type of local aristocracy, a very modest type, emerged. A key member of this aristocracy, he says, was his own family.

Whatever the accuracy of this history, which so far probably is pretty accurate, such stratification is completely unsurprising. In any human grouping, an aristocracy naturally arises, because people are not the same, and some people's talents are better suited to any given situation, so rewards and leadership flow their way. But Cercas obviously can't accept that; it contradicts left-wing doctrine of emancipation and equality, and thus reality must be denied, or rather simply ignored. Still, he is puzzled, because he doesn't have an alternative explanation for the development of this split. He didactically instructs us that "the interests of the community were the same," without making any effort to demonstrate it. It's obvious the villagers didn't think so. For example, Cercas talks several times about agricultural wage laborers forming "right-wing unions" early in the Republic, which would suggest that they didn't see their interests as the same as everyone else's, and he also talks briefly about how Ibahernando had a significant Protestant minority, although otherwise he ignores the importance of religion. Anybody but a Marxist can see that Ibahernando, like any other polity, had many competing interests, and only a few of them were economic ones.

That doesn't mean his family was conservative in Spanish political terms. His grandfather, one of the most prominent men in the village, was a Socialist when he was mayor for a brief time in the early 1930s. What seems to have happened is that much of the village did in fact view politics, for a time, through the lens of class, and supported the ending of the monarchy and the establishment of a republican form of government. But when it became evident what the real program of the Left was, agreed

to at the infamous Pact of San Sebastian, most of the village rejected it, especially when the Left unleashed violent attacks across the land, whereupon most of the village, from the meanest laborer to Cercas's grandfather, turned against the Left. Bizarrely, Cercas denies any of this leftist violence happened, at the same time he says that it caused a political earthquake in the village. "[T]he memory many elderly people in Ibahernando have of the Second Republic is a memory poisoned by confrontation, division, and violence. It is a false memory, a memory distorted or contaminated retrospectively by the memory of the Civil War that swept the Second Republic away."

There is indeed a falsehood here, but we don't need to go to the history books to see that Cercas is either lying or fooling himself, for his own history shows the lie. Cercas narrates how in 1933 the local Communists demanded suppression of religious festivities and repeatedly tried to burn the local church; how they collected weapons and shot at their enemies; how in 1935 they put together a plan to take a list of "people on the Right" and "proposed taking them one by one from their houses and murdering them" (a plot only stopped by the mayor's intervention); and how they tried to assassinate his maternal grandfather in 1934, by shotgunning him in the street. And when men on the Right asked for state protection, they were "advised to protect themselves." So they bought guns—and immediately after the February 1936 elections, the new Left governor of the province put both of Cercas's grandfathers in prison for "stockpiling weapons."

No wonder there was "growing anxiety." But there was only one source for that anxiety—the violence and hatred of the Left, and their open desire to exterminate their political opponents. Cercas, though, speaks constantly of "Francoist terror," without naming a single example prior to the war. There was some, later—as in all these divided Spanish villages, when the war broke out, the Right punished those who had been attacking them for years, and often people took the opportunity to settle personal scores. But Cercas, even though his own facts contradict him, treats Right violence as the only problem, when in reality it was purely reactive and defensive, and perhaps inevitable after years of Left threats and violence, and in an atmosphere where the town expected Republican army attack at any moment, such that the town square and the houses surrounding it were entrenched and sandbagged.

That doesn't mean the villagers who rejected the Left became Falangists, or even Francoists. Outside the centers of power, most people aren't driven by politics, or at least to the same degree, and this is a lesson for today. They just saw the Left as the greater evil, and they had to pick a side, because of what men of power far away had done. Many of the men of the village, rich or poor, fought in volunteer militias for the Nationalists in the first few months of the war, including Cercas's paternal grandfather, but they were sent home by the end of 1936, as the Nationalists consolidated and professionalized Franco's initially ad hoc army. Cercas throws up chaff to obscure their choice, condescendingly claiming that the poor disliked "disorder." They had a "superstitious love for order and tradition"; they were "addicted to order," so they joined the Nationalists. His argument is that if the Left had simply been more communicative about the reasons they were killing people the village would have supported them. But the truth is pretty obvious, if wholly unpalatable to Cercas—his village was mostly, or nearly all, Franco supporters, including his great uncle, and presumably including his mother, about whose political beliefs Cercas says nothing. But, as I say, we never get any detail or discussion about Right political views, in fact, other than the bare narration that many of the author's relatives fought for the Nationalists.

Cercas marches on, though, trapped in his own frame. He quotes his socialist cousin at length, that it is incomprehensible that villagers didn't unite with the Left to fight their "true enemies," the landowners. He studiously ignores the complexities of the Spanish Right, such as that the Falange's philosophy actually had many left-wing, populist elements, and, as Cercas himself discusses in the context of Mena's pro-Falange writings, "preached the harmony of classes." Cercas has to do this, because he is aiming at his main goal, to "prove" that Mena, a vigorous Falangist, was self-deluded, but he couldn't help it. He was just a kid "intoxicated by pernicious idealism"; all that he believed was merely an "ideological concoction devised by the oligarchy to halt socialist and democratic equality." "He had lost everything fighting for a cause that was not his but that of others." No doubt Cercas buys into Marxist delusions like "false consciousness," though that phrase doesn't appear here.

And, finally, desperate for an arc to his story that contradicts the story of a young hero who died for his ideals, Cercas constructs a fantasy in which Mena became wholly disillusioned by the war. No doubt, after much direct experience with war, he was disillusioned—only some men, a minority, enjoy war, although for many it is a mixed bag, never all bad or all good. Cercas builds up to what he thinks is the culmination of his book—an elderly uncle suddenly remembers, although he never told anyone before, was not there, and cannot remember who told him, that in his last visit to the village Mena told someone that the war was hard and that he had done his duty; that he didn't want to go back to the front, but was going to anyway, because if he didn't, another uncle would have had to go to war. Cercas responds "Are you saying that Manuel Mena was fed up with the war?" To which the old man replies, "Exactly. Fed up." This is what is called in law the rankest hearsay, along with leading the witness. It's meaningless. But not in the context of Cercas's project, which seems to be primarily to exonerate himself to his social peers today for the fact that his family was Francoist, and Cercas treats the old man's words as a revelation comparable to Prometheus bringing fire to Man. Oh, it's probably true. I bet Manuel Mena was fed up with the war. I bet most soldiers in his position were fed up with the war and would far prefer it be over. This is a commonplace throughout history. But that doesn't mean that he didn't also know that the only way home was to win against the Communists, or that he had changed his mind about what was necessary for Spain to flourish and thrive.

So what does this say about our own political divisions? Less than one might think. In Spain, there were clear and unbridgeable political divisions among the ruling classes, which inevitably led to war. Here, there are no such divisions—our ruling classes, Democrat and Republican, are united in their contempt for the deplorables, many of whom bear a suspicious resemblance to the poor citizenry of Ibahernando. Trump may talk about fighting the ruling classes, and they do hate him because he threatens their cushy position by the chaos he creates and the positions he theoretically espouses, which if unchecked might empower the deplorables, but Jared and Ivanka, and the rest of those who influence and limit Trump, aren't really opposed to George Soros and Gavin Newsom politically. All these people are just fighting over the spoils, not fighting about principles with each other. Their



collective vision is a continuation of the neoliberal atomized hell with leftist social policies in which we live (which, to be fair, has been very, very good to me, but I am a traitor to my class).

To the extent there are real divisions outside the ruling class, Americans, with their comfortable lifestyles, addiction to safety, and facing the overwhelming power and reach of the government, aren't going to fight for anything, among themselves or against the government. Claims otherwise, anywhere on the political spectrum, are all LARPing for the social media cameras. People on the Right point to Antifa as a budding locus of violence, but that's not true in any meaningful way. Antifa is a clown show, performance theater. They only engage in violence because they are protected by the police and judges in the places they do it; if they showed up any other place but a few friendly urban locales, they would regret it, and quickly. Look at them. They are fat losers. In a real civil war they would run and hide as fast as their tubby little legs could carry them. No, like most people in Ibahernando, the average American just wants to get by, and enjoy life, and isn't, for better or worse, going to actually fight about politics.

At least they're not going to fight yet. The Wuhan Plague, and more the government overreaction to it, has turned the ratchet a few more turns. Someday the ruling classes are no longer going to be able to print money and make promises to keep the peasants from becoming restless, and they will be thrust to the side as the political currents of Left and Right rear their heads and assume shape under leaders yet to be named. Or perhaps we will have a tripartite split, with the ruling classes fighting simultaneously against a newly organized, competent, and risk-taking Left and Right. We will then see, in every locale, what Ibahernando did—that no, we can't all just get along, because one vision of the good must rule, and incompatible visions are, well, incompatible.

And, finally, back to my great aunt, who told me that war is a terrible thing. This same sentiment runs throughout this book, although without nuance or understanding, since Cercas has apparently taken no risks in his life, and he cannot escape his ideological prison when viewing the past. He seems to want to think that war can both be brutal and evil, and noble and necessary, but cannot bear to apply that principle to his great uncle. Cercas would do well to read Sebastian Junger's *Tribe*, which lays out what war really means for modern men, and explains,

aside from politics, why, perhaps, Manuel Mena fought and died. I think that the idea of a *kalos thanatos* should not be encouraged; it is a pagan ideal, after all, and as the father of three young sons it does not appeal to me. But sacrifice combined with seeking a transcendent goal has a key place in any society that is going anywhere.

What is true for a man is true for a society—there are worse things than war, as terrible as war is. Far worse for Spain, for example, to have been ruled by the Communists, both in terms of the number of dead and in the ruination of the nation. Sometimes, often, we must choose between two unpalatable choices. My own aunt was not saying that Hungary was wrong to fight in the war; given history and circumstance, it was both necessary and inevitable. Rather, her point was to remember, when and if a man of power, I should count the cost, and not idly or blindly feed the little people into the maw of the machine. This is a universal truth, untied to ideology. But Cercas's book fails because he views everything through ideology. *Lord of All the Dead* could have been a fascinating exploration of the Spanish conflict on a local level, but instead, it's just claptrap.