

# Europe's contempt for the war

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By Jonathan Power

THE US policy "has weakened a civilisation that is also its own" wrote Juan Luis Cebrian, the founding editor of Spain's principal newspaper, *El Pais*, the other day.

Everywhere one goes here one runs headlong into what the polls say, that over 85% of the population is against the decision by Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar to support George Bush in his war against Iraq. Since the demise of Franco, with the savage civil war behind it, Spain has been in a mood of relatively quiet politics, intent on healing division rather than provoking it.

Politics has not been, as in its Mediterranean Latin sister, Italy, either a subject for bitter party contest or over heated conversation. No more perhaps. I go up to the police station to report the theft of my car papers and all the policeman wants to talk about are his strong feelings on the war.

I go out swimming on Sunday far into the Atlantic with the two young sisters who grew up

metres from the sea and know these dangerous, turbulent, waters inside out, whom I befriended 5 years ago whilst briefly living and writing a book here, and find instead of our usual conversation about the state of the sea and their parents' leather goods shop in which they work that they are cross examining me about the war.

Even the old lady who runs the haberdashery in my writer's hideaway — an unspoilt village in the island of Tenerife — hangs out a notice "No a la Guerra".

In all my life I have never met such a vociferous anti-war feeling. I grew up in England through the Suez crisis when tempers ran high and my father thrust the strong opinions of the Manchester Guardian under my nose, studied in the US during Vietnam and its protests, lived at various times all over Europe, most recently in Sweden, during times of peace and war but never have come across such a coalescing of opinion, such deeply held conviction that war is a blunt tool, and for sophisticated peoples probably an unnecessary one, and such heartfelt desire to put war behind us for all time.

What is different this time round it is not just the students and the thinking liberals who are against this war, it is every man and woman in the street who never cared tuppence about politics before unless it concerned the income tax they paid and the state of their health care. This mood I suspect is no temporary one, cut to the cloth of George Bush's Texan swaggering insensitivity which, as Cebrian says, "has earned the contempt of wide sectors of western public opinion, losing capacity for leadership, squandering the fund of support and solidarity that the world gave it after the September 11th attacks".

It is a profound sea change in the culture of West European society, one that has been bubbling up almost unnoticed it for decades but which is now exploding like an unplugged volcano. Knowing about if not experiencing the terrible world wars, the use of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the humbling of the superpowers in Vietnam and Afghanistan and even the very mixed bag of results in Bosnia and Kosovo when war was waged for purely

humanitarian reasons, it appears now that a large majority has concluded that waging war seems to make little political sense when compared with the havoc and mayhem wrecked on both human life and human artefacts.

Also having created the European Union out of the ashes of the Second World War there is a tangible sense that if in history's book the most war prone part of the earth could find a way to live side by side then other societies can do it too. Not least is the growing conviction, that once beat slowly but has reached a rude and striking tempo of confidence, that if democracy can be spread by non-violent means to the four corners of the planet — it has already jumped in a relatively small space of time from 25% of the world to 65% (80% of its peoples if one excludes China) — then democracies will not go to war with each other.

I don't know how much my friends, the mermaids, understood of all this argument as I laid it out between strokes across the ocean, but I suspect from their nodding and thoughtful interjections that even the less

educated have somehow got the picture, the work of thousands, no trillions, of hours of hard work over 50 years by educators of all types, school teachers, priests, journalists, novelists, filmmakers, and non-governmental organisations — big ones like Amnesty International and Oxfam and more specialised ones like Sweden's Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research, that has at last bitten deep into the soul of Europe.

After the thousandth book on the holocaust or Vietnam has been published, millions of kilometres of film bringing us close up to the ugliness of war have rolled across the television, after article after article by journalists who feel a deep compassion for war and hunger's victims, after educators have set to work determined that the next generation should be raised with different attitudes.

It is far too early to say that European societies will never sanction war again, but we should not underestimate how profound a step has been taken.—Copyright Jonathan Power