



Eugenio Xammar. *El huevo de la serpiente: Cr nicas desde Alemania (1922-1924)*. Foreword by Charo Gonz lez Prada. Barcelona: Acantilado, 2005. 299 pp. EUR 20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-84-96489-16-5.

Eugenio Xammar. *Cr nicas desde Berlin (1930-1936)*. Barcelona: Acantilado, 2005. 361 pp. EUR 20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-84-96489-17-2.



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A Contemporary Catalan View of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s

There is nothing like a good coup d' tat. At least, that is what the Catalan reporter Eugenio Xammar thought in November 1923, in the immediate wake of the failed Hitler putsch. As a correspondent for the Catalan daily, *La Veu de Catalunya*, Xammar had been in the *B rgerbr ukeller* on the fateful evening of November 8. Written only hours after the failed putsch, Xammar's eyewitness account of the event proves not only an interesting document, but also a very readable text, due to its ironic style and black humor.

In 1923, Eugenio, or Eugeni, Xammar (1888-1973), who had been stationed in London before the First World War and in Paris during the war, was a veteran foreign correspondent. After the war he worked for the League of Nations in Geneva, but soon decided to return to journalism. After November 1922, he reported from Berlin, which would remain his base until 1936. A devoted liberal republican, he left Berlin at the outbreak of the Span-

ish Civil War to take part in the defense of the Spanish Republic.

Xammar seems to have been constantly working, writing with a quick hand and a sharp eye, for newspapers based both in Barcelona and Madrid, as well as Latin America. His work proves to be journalism at its best, timeless literature documenting its own time. As such, his writing is a rich source for anyone interested in inter-war Germany, but because it was written in Catalan and Spanish and not reprinted after its original publication, it has remained unknown to most latter-day scholars of Germany of the 1920s and 1930s.

In 1998, a collection of Xammar's Catalan articles from late 1922 to 1924 was published in Catalan. That volume is now available in Spanish, in a translation by Ana Prieto Nadal, under the title *El huevo de la serpiente: Cr nicas desde Alemania (1922-1924)* (*The Serpent's Egg:*

Chronicles from Germany (1922-1924)). A second volume edited by González Prada introduces the Spanish language articles Xammar wrote for the Madrid newspaper *Ahora* from 1930, when it was founded, to 1936, when it ceased publication. That volume is now available under the title *Crónicas desde Berlín (1930-1936)* (*Chronicles from Berlin (1930-1936)*).

Even though both volumes prove fruitful reading for anyone interested in the German interwar years, the first one is especially exciting, since it contains nothing less than a small sensation. On the morning of November 8, 1923, only hours before the attempted putsch, Xammar was able to interview Adolf Hitler at length. Although this interview alone would make this book worth buying, one could mention too that it contains many other noteworthy interviews with individuals such as German Chancellor Wilhelm Marx, from April 1924, and Czechoslovak President Tomáš Masaryk, from July 1924.

After having arrived in Berlin in late 1922, Xammar seems to have established rapidly an impressive social network, especially among like-minded liberal-oriented journalists, including, for example, Siegfried Jacobsohn and Stefan Grossmann, the publishers of the journals *Die Weltwoche* and *Das Tage-Buch*, respectively. He also worked closely with another Berlin-based Catalan writer, Josep Pla, who later became one of the most renowned Catalan writers of the twentieth century. Years afterwards, Pla claimed that Xammar was the most intelligent man he had ever met and that he had learned more from Xammar than any book he had encountered.

Throughout 1923, Xammar covered the apparently inevitable disintegration of the German Republic while in Berlin and on extensive travels in the Rhine Valley and Ruhr area. In his day-to-day account of events, he often noticed small but significant changes, thereby putting his finger on details often overlooked. For example, Xammar noted that hyperinflation ran with different speed in different parts of Germany. In February 1923, after having arrived (from Berlin) in French-occupied Essen, Xammar recorded a conversation with a passerby, in which the man gave him a vivid description of the unsustainable situation that followed the occupation. When relating that the dollar now was worth 19.232 marks, the surprised Xammar interrupted with a spontaneous question: "What, the dollar is worth less than 20.000 marks?" (p. 89). The man stopped speaking immediately and took a good look at Xammar before leaving without further comment. This episode illustrates, too, the ironic

twists concerning his own person that Xammar often used when writing.

In October 1923, in light of escalating violence throughout a convulsing Germany, fear of civil war was on the rise. It was openly claimed that after the foreseeable decline of the Gustav Stresemann cabinet, nothing could hold back the avalanche that would trigger full-scale civil war. Xammar quoted a headline: "After Stresemann, total fall" (p. 174). In early November, he wrote from Berlin that "the civil war has not yet broken out, but it could take off this afternoon, or tomorrow, or the day after" (p. 178). Then he and Pla took the train to Munich, looking for the spark that threatened to ignite the powder keg.

In order to go to Munich from Berlin, the two correspondents had to change trains in Cologne. But Cologne was in the British occupation zone and crossing the checkpoint between the French and the British zones took hours and hours. Xammar had plenty of time to interview his fellow passengers. Apparently, locals viewed the British zone as an oasis of relative peace and stability, surrounded by the French zone's chaos and atrocities. After having interviewed the British commander in Cologne, General Alexander Godley, Xammar concluded that unlike the French, the British understood the meaning of *savoir faire*.

Before continuing to Munich, the two correspondents stayed in the occupied Rhine valley. In Koblenz, Xammar noted the presence of Rhenish separatists by their red, white, and green banners, which represented the self-acclaimed Rhineland Republic, the ever-present unofficial Rhineland army, and the ongoing build-up of independent institutions, supervised by the provisional Rhenish government. Xammar interviewed the head of that government, Josef Friedrich Matthes, who argued that the people of the Rhineland were the true German republicans. After the fall of the present German republic, according to Matthes, a new republic would emerge, with Rhineland at its center and Bonn as its capital, a federalized state, free from both French and Prussian oppression. Matthes mentioned the *Oberbürgermeister* of Cologne, Konrad Adenauer, as one of the leaders who would realize this new German republic. "And you are sure of a successful outcome?" Xammar asked. "It is as sure as that I right now have you here in front of me" Matthes answered (p. 197). Xammar's articles help us to unravel the deeply laid roots of post-1945 Germany.

On the evening of November 7, 1923, Xammar and Pla arrived in Munich. Early the next morning they

went to the editorial office of the newspaper, *Völkische Beobachter*, hoping to interview Hitler. A month earlier, from his Berlin perspective, Xammar had described Hitler as an energetic jerk who wanted to overthrow the republic. On the basis of a photograph, Xammar outlined Hitler as a man “who [wore] a waistbelt around his overcoat (probably, one does not need to say more)” (p. 168). Xammar was not particularly impressed by the man he wanted to interview.

Entering the newspaper’s office, Pla noticed that the place looked more like an army camp than an editorial office. From within, they could hear Hitler shouting: “Two Spaniards? Two Spaniards!”. Then Hitler came and gave them an overwhelming welcome. “Every door in Bavaria will open up to Spaniards,” he assured them, and he immediately gave an interview (p. 205). Or rather, according to the journalists, he recited a long monologue. But why did Hitler, on the morning of the planned putsch, set all planning aside to give an improvised interview to two journalists from Spain? One possible answer could be that in September 1923, General Miguel Primo de Rivera y Orbaneja had overthrown the Spanish state and set up a military dictatorship. He and Spain had become an inspiring example for the early Nazis. Pla even noted that from the moment they entered, everyone in the office had spoken well of Primo de Rivera. Hitler may have understood their visit as a chance to get good press in Spain. Apparently, Hitler was also impressed by the way that the Spaniards had expelled all the Jews during the sixteenth century, an issue he returned to repeatedly during the interview.

Hitler told Xammar and Pla that he liked Spanish journalists because they were not Jewish. According to Hitler, every other foreign correspondent, regardless of passport, was a Jew. “Hitler smiled,” Xammar wrote, “and so did I, but not as cordially as he did” (p. 205). Then Hitler started to talk about Germany’s current problems, which he blamed on the Jews. “If we want to keep Germany alive, we have to eliminate all Jews,” Hitler stated. Xammar wondered how that should be effected: “Public onslaught?” Hitler’s answer appears to have come with a sigh: “If only ... But they are simply too many” (p. 206). According to Hitler, there were “more than a million Jews” in Germany and therefore classical pogroms were “hopelessly inefficient.” Instead of massive killings, he had decided that the “second best solution” was massive expulsion. Here he saw Spain as a good example to be followed. But he also recognized a “major error” that the sixteenth-century Spaniards had made, since they had let converted Jews stay. Hitler stated that “the Jewish

question” was not a question of belief, but instead one of “race” and that the Spaniard’s “failure” to see it as such had led to bad consequences for Spain ever since (p. 207). However, it is hard to know what Hitler meant, since the Spanish censors erased a part of the interview. But the censors did not object to its end, when Hitler spoke critically of the Vatican and the contemporary self-appointed ruler of Bavaria, Gustav von Kahr. In Hitler’s view, von Kahr had not done enough to expel all the Jews. Hitler claimed that von Kahr was a Catholic, and as such he was loyal to the Vatican and to the “Catholic-Jewish conspiracy” that sought to hinder the “National Socialist’s liberation of the German people” (p. 208).

Xammar’s presentation of Hitler to his readers in 1923 made no secret of his opinion that Hitler was an obstreperous lunatic, albeit an amusing one. At the end of the interview, Xammar added, “tomorrow we will be informed about Hitler’s economic policies” (p. 208). That ending indicates both that Hitler had invited them to return the next day and that Xammar had written out the interview during the afternoon, before going to the *Bürgerbräukeller*, where he was to experience the putsch at first hand.

This interview with Hitler was published in the *La Veu de Catalunya* on November 24, 1923, a week after the publication of the report of the putsch. Because of the rapid turn of events, Xammar mentioned that the interview had become somewhat obsolete. But then he added that even though Hitler was now in custody, it might still be of interest for the reader to know what had run through the head of “the future former dictator of Germany” hours before his attempted coup d’État (p. 204). In connection to Xammar’s interview with Hitler, this volume also contains the interview Pla held on the same occasion, originally published in the journal *La Publicitat* on November 28, 1923.

In comparison with his writings in Catalan during 1922-24, Xammar’s Spanish articles from 1930-36 keep a lower profile. In the 1930s, Xammar seems to have been sitting in Berlin, summarizing information he received from local newspapers and the radio, so the latter volume is less surprising than the former. Still, Xammar’s style of writing remains a good read. The chilly, frightening day-to-day reports Xammar sent home also bear evidence of his growing fear.

Apparently, Xammar wrote and published for a vast number of different newspapers and journals and did so without thinking of having his work compiled and reprinted in books or otherwise being preserved for pos-

terity. These two volumes are, therefore, only part of a much larger body of articles still to be excavated from archives in Spain and Latin America. One can only hope that someone will take on that excavation, as well as a speedy translation of these two volumes into English and German.

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