

George Esenwein, Adrian Shubert. *Spain at War: The Spanish Civil War in Context, 1931-1939.* London and New York: Longman, 1995. xi + 313 pp. \$58.64, cloth, ISBN 978-0-582-25943-0.



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The dominant images of the Spanish Civil War in the English-speaking world have largely come from outsiders to Spain. Through the literary voices of George Orwell or Ernest Hemingway, or through the heroic picture of the volunteers of the International Brigades, the Spanish Civil War has been perceived less as an event in itself than as a struggle between good and evil, whether the gallant struggle of democracy against fascism, or, on the nationalist side, a crusade in defense of God and order against Bolshevism.

George Esenwein and Adrian Shubert attribute this distortion of the war both to the intense propaganda campaign by both sides during and after the war to unify and inspire their constituencies and to the outbreak of World War II only five months after Franco's final victory, making the Spanish Civil War seem a dress rehearsal for a greater conflict. Only the healing passage of time and Spain's return to democracy now make possible a new and more nuanced exploration of the Spanish Civil War, one unconstrained by ideology and capable of encompassing the complexities of history. As their subtitle proclaims, Esen-

wein and Shubert aim to put the Spanish Civil War into context, but they do not have in mind an international or ideological context. Instead, they hope to return the Civil War to its essentially Spanish context. Their civil war is not about Hitler and Stalin, but about Franco and Negrin. Their "short, analytical narrative" succeeds admirably in presenting a concise yet comprehensive picture of a complex event.

That Esenwein and Shubert's "analytical narrative" manages to be short is almost as worthy of applause as the skill with which they present their conclusions. All questions of politics or interpretation aside, one would hesitate to assign undergraduates the 1,115 pages of the 1986 edition of Hugh Thomas's *The Spanish Civil War* or the 1,074 pages of Burnett Bolloten's. Though the authors never state this as their aim, their book is well suited for undergraduates in need of an incisive text. *Spain at War* includes a selected bibliography of the most important English-language scholarship on the war, two extremely helpful glossaries of the profusion of Spanish political

movements and of the key actors in the war, and four maps charting the war's course.

Adrian Shubert of York University (Toronto) wrote the first five chapters of the book, taking the story up through the attempted military coup of 17 July 1936 that launched the Civil War. His chief agenda is to absolve the Second Republic of responsibility for its own destruction. As he puts it, "The Civil War was the result of the failure of a military rising against a legitimately-elected democratic government, not the failure of the Republic" (p. 33). On the contrary, the *coup d'état* came not from the defects of the Republic, of which there were certainly many, but from the possibility that the Republic might succeed, transforming Spain into something that the Spanish Right was unprepared to accept.

For republicanism in Spain was not and could not be a mere matter of political procedure or constitutional arrangement. Republicanism entailed instead a commitment to modernizing Spain through asserting the primacy of the state over the interests of the church, the army, and agrarian elites. As a result of making this interpretation the climax of his first chapter on the political roots of the war, Shubert structures the next four chapters on the church, the regions, the military, and social conflict not as problems facing Spain or as aspects of Spanish society, but instead as reforms that the Republic undertook to change the face of Spain. Though Shubert treats very well the issues of the hide-bound church, increasingly divorced from popular religious feeling, and of regionalism, including traditionalist Basque nationalism and bourgeois Catalan nationalism, his argument about the fall of the Republic comes through most clearly in the chapters on the Spanish army and on social conflict.

For all the military's opposition to the Republic, officers were indeed treated quite well by Manuel Azana (Prime Minister, 1931-33), perhaps even too well. To reduce the bloated officer corps, Azana offered voluntary retirement at full pay to

any who wished it. Though he democratized the officer corps to the extent of eliminating the distinction between officers commissioned through the academies and those who rose through the ranks, and reduced the army's influence over civilian administration, he did preside over the return of promotions to a strict seniority basis, eliminating merit promotions. While hardly striking a blow for military efficiency, this did give nervous officers some of the security and stability they desired. When Azana returned to office with the Popular Front in February 1936, he did little to harm the interests of the Spanish officer corps, certainly nothing to justify armed insurrection.

Shubert argues that the military coup "was provoked essentially by the threat that Left-Wing governments, impelled by the mobilization of the working class, would institute fundamental social reforms, and especially of the system of landholding.... It was in defence of property that the right organized itself politically during the Republic" (p. 78). This organization was quite effective, managing to block any significant land reform under Azana, but what created true panic in the Right was the October 1934 Asturias insurrection, the "central event" of the Republic. This short-lived uprising not only provided a rallying cry for the Spanish Left, but gave the Spanish Right its image of what leftist government might bring. When the Popular Front won the elections of February 1936, it was driven from below by a wave of strikes and spontaneous land seizures to accelerate the pace of reform. The conspirators within the Spanish military could tolerate no more, and launched their coup on 17 July 1936. The failure of that coup to seize complete power, and especially the cities of Madrid and Barcelona, meant that the Nationalists would have to prevail through a long and bloody civil war.

George Esenwein of the University of Florida takes over for chapters six through twelve, covering the war itself. His focus is on the war's political history, broadly considered, though he does

devote a chapter to the well-known and tawdry diplomatic history of cynical intervention and craven non-intervention. The strictly military side of the war is covered in some degree, though not in great detail.

In keeping with Esenwein's focus on politics, there is much on the stark contrast between the Republican and Nationalist ability to establish and maintain unity. On both sides of the front lines, moderate parties were largely discredited by the military coup and subsequent radicalization to the Left and the Right. Under Franco's Nationalists, however, the military's clear predominance enforced political unity. Franco could use monarchists, Carlists, and the fascists of the Falange without ever being used by them. Matters were quite different on the Republican side, where the socialists (the PSOE) and their trade union (the UGT), the anarchists and their trade union (the CNT), the vaguely Trotskyite POUM, and the Spanish Communists at best observed an uneasy truce and at worst engaged in open warfare. If there is a villain in Esenwein's story of the fall of the Republic, it is the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), which parlayed its control over the flow of Soviet arms into rapid growth in power and influence from its feeble prewar state. Though none of the Republic's factions was free from responsibility for its fractured nature, for Esenwein the PCE was more concerned with Moscow's interests than Madrid's, and even when the war was clearly lost insisted on prolonging the bloodshed to no good purpose.

By comparison with, say, Thomas's *Spanish Civil War*, Esenwein devotes substantial attention to popular revolution. He does discuss Franco's experiments with fascist solutions to social conflicts, but far more space is devoted to the meaning of revolution in day-to-day life in the Republic. The *coup d'etat* unleashed the Right's worst nightmares. The most vicious mob violence that slaughtered priests and the wealthy (mirrored, *mutatis mutandis*, on the Nationalist side) was

paralleled by utopian experiments in transforming society. Business enterprises and agricultural land were seized and collectivized, while such distinctions of social rank as hats were eliminated from Republican life. This same utopianism had its ironic counterpart on the Nationalist side in the vision of an "organic" society encompassing and reconciling the interests of labor and capital to end social strife. Esenwein also explores the unique military style that grew up on the Republican side, with political parties having their own pet military units, officers subject to election, and military orders open to discussion and debate. In that context, Esenwein raises the puzzling question of why, given the Republic's utopianism and faith in popular revolution, it never resorted to guerrilla warfare, Spain's long tradition notwithstanding.

The book does so very well what it sets out to do, namely, to provide a concise, clear history of the war, that finding something to critique is quite difficult. Still, given that many history departments cannot hire Spanish historians or even offer courses on Spain, this book will most likely find itself used in European history surveys. With that constraint in mind, expanding the comparative side of this book would have helped students separate the general from the particularly Spanish. Seen in comparison with Italy and Eastern Europe, Spain's persistent failure to solve the problem of rural poverty and the instability of democratic government looks quite normal. The Spanish working class appears unique, on the other hand, in its affection for anarchism and an especially intense strain of anti-clericalism. Likewise, by comparison with Soviet Russia, Republican Spain's utopian experiments in social life do not appear quite so strange. A deeper exploration of the European context of Spanish history would have added to the book.

This is, however, to criticize Shubert and Esenwein for what I would want them to write, not a critique of what they actually wrote. Their

achievement in fashioning an excellent synthesis of a difficult subject deserves appreciation, just as *Spain at War* deserves a place on the reading list of European history courses.

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