

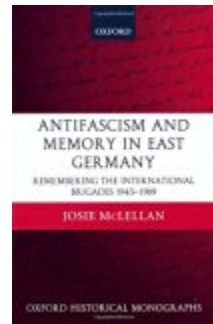


Josie McLellan. *Anti-Fascism and Memory in East Germany: Remembering the International Brigades 1945-1989*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004. xi + 228 pp. \$215.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-927626-4.

Reviewed by Dan Todman

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Germans and the International Brigade

On first thought, an examination of the way in which the participation of the approximately four thousand German speakers who fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War was remembered in East Germany might seem to be a niche study within a specialization. Such preconceptions should be put aside; Josie McLellan's *AntiFascism and Memory* is an excellent book, marked by its breadth of source material and the subtlety of its analysis, that deserves to be very widely read. It obviously will have relevance for scholars specializing in the German Democratic Republic, for historians of the mythology and "afterlife" of the Spanish Civil War, and cultural historians of the Cold War. But it should also find itself on the reading list of all those interested in the "memory" and remembrance of war more generally, for it is to this field that it makes a striking contribution.

McLellan describes how pre-Second World War German antifascism became a central plank of East German political culture beginning in 1945. The active, armed agency embodied by those who fought for the Left in Spain—the *Spanienkämpfer*—was particularly attractive to the state, because it offered an alternative to the shared Nazi past that could be used to motivate, control, and absolve its people of responsibility for Nazi actions. To these ends, German participation in the International Brigades was commemorated and celebrated across the cultural spectrum. Ceremonies were held to award veterans medals, officially ordained histories were published, and the International Brigades became a mainstay of

East German childhood through treasure hunts, via story books, and in campfire sing-alongs. The place of the 1000 East German antifascist veterans in this commemorative activity was persistent, but unstable. They had often become state functionaries, and most remained fiercely loyal to the party. They were often willing and eager to adapt their public remembrance of the war to the state line—a matter of pragmatism as well as personal fulfillment after the wholesale screening and purging of the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, the German Socialist Unity Party) in the early 1950s.

Spanienkämpfer also, however, retained their own memories of their time at war, many of which conflicted with the simplicities of the official version, even if they did not contradict it. For example, one of the key bonds between *Spanienkämpfer*, as with many veterans, were memories of shared suffering, of horseplay, and the mild misbehavior that in Australia became identified with the "larrikin" spirit. Yet, these characteristics were anathema to the one-dimensional heroes required by the state. Ironically, it was precisely these features that succeeded in intriguing some in what McLellan terms the "second generation"—those born under Communism—where the state's slipstreamed heroes produced only an indoctrinated apathy. That second generation had, however, to turn to other sources—Western or literary—to gain a version of antifascism it actually wanted to use. Principally because of the way in which it controlled and disciplined the country, the East German state could not ultimately

use the idealism that attracted both antifascists and subsequent generations to perpetuate its rule past the end of the 1980s. McLellan begins by examining the experiences of volunteers themselves, before, during, and after the Spanish Civil War. Mostly working class men, some of whom had already been forced out of Germany by Nazi persecution, they were strongly motivated by a desire to fight back against Fascism. In Spain, they experienced severe fighting, heavy casualties, Republican and International Brigade infighting, and eventual defeat, but also camaraderie and a distinctly German identity. After the war, the survivors' fates varied. Approximately a third were imprisoned in Germany, about a sixth were involved in the resistance movement in France—sometimes after internment—during the Second World War, and roughly another sixth travelled to the Soviet Union. After Germany's defeat in 1945, they were united by a desperate desire to return to their homeland, to rebuild it and reclaim it for the Left. Next, McLellan turns to the experiences of those *Spanienkämpfer* who did return. Accepting the SED's instructions to serve the state, most of them became *apparatchiks* in the armed forces, police, or central and local government. Here, they struggled with the incongruities of the communal past, having to come to terms with the rehabilitation and re-employment of members of the Nazi party as their subordinates and colleagues. Those who had had contact with foreign influences—which in one way or another was most of them—then found themselves subject to interrogation and sometimes re-education during the purges of the early 1950s. This frequently involved the writing of "life narratives" which were scrutinized for inconsistency with previous statements, others' accounts, and the party line. The anguished complaint of one veteran after his interrogation by the cadre chief of the Central Committee speaks volumes for the confusion this process engendered amongst the *Spanienkämpfer*:

"He questioned me almost like a Gestapo man and then demanded that I write more about this and that in my life.... (You cannot and should not carry out cadre discussions in the way he treated me, even if you had an enemy in front of you)" (p. 61).

Following the political liberalization of the mid-1950s, the SED then attempted to reintegrate veterans. As McLellan goes on to describe, the party had appropriated the remembrance of German participation in the International Brigades as a foundation myth for its armed forces, as a means of indoctrinating the young, and as a way of constructing a version of German history which fit its own dogma. These uses both allowed veterans a

significant place in East German commemorative culture, particularly at the local level at those points when Spain was not the center of attention, and demanded that they adapt their public remembrance to fit what was acceptable to the state. Nonetheless, and despite the blanketing nature of a totalitarian society, this was, McLellan suggests, a disputed history. Whether in private conversations or in memoirs they wrote for themselves, because of errors by censors or subterfuge by publishers, or because they simply could not help but react to public versions of the past, veterans preserved alternative accounts of their experiences. Sculptor Fritz Cremer's 1967 statue to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the International Brigade is a useful example. Bizarrely anatomically distorted to fit the ideological needs of the state, it aroused objections from even the most loyal *Spanienkämpfer* on the grounds of its unrealism. It did not fit what they remembered; they did not wish to fight with the state, but they did want to correct its version where they could.

McLellan then moves on to consider a younger generation of poets, writers and film-makers, who were attracted by the romance of the foreign volunteers in Spain, but who had no means of integrating the memories of the *Spanienkämpfer* into their work, so deadened did the subject seem by state propaganda. She then discusses the processes—official, public, and private—by which these memories were censored, before moving to a final chapter on the interaction between remembrance, memory, and ideology within a totalitarian system.

One of the great joys of this book is the range of sources used. McLellan conducted extensive research in the state archives (particularly effective in a case such as this where state influence extended into every aspect of life), but she also uses published and unpublished memoirs, works of fiction and history, images of memorials, and oral history interviews to build up a detailed picture of the complexity of individual memory and public remembrance. She handles these sources with great sensitivity and respect. No matter what the absurdities of the system or the illogicalities of the individual position, McLellan refuses to mock, to dismiss, or to take at face value. She steadfastly reminds her readers that simply because East Germans lived under a totalitarian system does not mean that we should assume that they accepted whatever they were told, or that they all believed the same thing. As she notes: "The party could control the content of official produced accounts, but it was unable to control the ways in which readers reacted to them" (p. 95).

It is here that *AntiFascism and Memory* can claim to make a real contribution to the history of the remembrance of war. As McLellan points out, much of the work in this field has concentrated on the way remembrance has worked in Western democracies. Following the analytical line established largely by Jay Winter, this tends to construct social agency and state action as two different aspects of remembrance.[1] Here, the activity of those communities, small or large, brought together in the aftermath of war can act to preserve and highlight different versions of experience. These may coincide with, oppose, or modify remembrance as ordained by the state. The conversion of the Cenotaph in London from a temporary to a permanent memorial, in response to the overwhelming expression of public mourning focused on it in the weeks after the Peace Parade of 1919, is an example of this social agency in action. McLellan's case is that in East Germany this tension between state action and social agency was impossible, because without state support no commemorative activity of any sort could take place, and because most veterans identified so closely with the state that they were unwilling to dissent its judgements. Nevertheless, diverse versions did remain. East Germans did not mindlessly accept the party line, and veterans, albeit within tightly restrained lines, perpetuated divergent and various memories of their war. Their personal memoirs written "for the drawer" (p. 149), the initial manuscripts which they adapted for the censor, and their comments to their families and to each other, were shaped by the circumstances in which they lived, but they were not homogeneous. As McLellan has it: "This was a pale substitute for a robust public debate. But it does show just how resilient individual memories were—even those which directly contradicted the party line did not disappear altogether" (p. 145).

In making this point, McLellan builds on the work of Alistair Thomson (on the memories of individual Australian soldiers of the First World War) and Catherine Merridale (on the remembrance of war and revolution in modern Russia).[2] But whereas Thomson concentrated on a limited number of surviving soldiers and Merridale has written on a broader scale, the relatively small number of *Spanienkämpfer* and the breadth of archival resources allow McLellan to bridge the gaps between individuals, communities, and the nation state. Her work improves our understanding of how individuals adapt and preserve their personal histories even in the most uncondusive circumstances. This, then, is a book of deep thought and wide relevance. There are, however, some areas in which *AntiFascism and Memory* might have been

expanded further had space and time permitted. First, this reader was interested to know to what degree, if any, there were parallels in West Germany, and more generally with the post-war experience of pre-war anti-fascists in Eastern and Western Europe. McLellan describes the way in which officials conducting a survey on the effectiveness of the thirtieth-anniversary commemorations were confounded by the presence of West German tourists amongst their interviewees. East Germans had, by the late 1960s, been so well indoctrinated that they could recite the appropriate myths of the "national revolutionary war" in Spain with ease (p. 77), even if they could not in fact distinguish between the various whitewashed heroes. Their visitors from across the inner German border, however, associated Spain not with the struggle of the working class, but with cheap package holidays to the sun. If there were veterans of Spain in West Germany, therefore, what were their experiences and how did they compare to their former comrades on the other side of the national divide? Second, although the focus of the book is on a specifically East German phenomenon, some discussion of Spanish Civil War remembrance during and after reunification might also have been in order. As McLellan points out, both the idealisms that were a central part of the mythology, and the generation of *Spanienkämpfer*, had faded out almost completely by 1989. But, given their place as an alternative version of the national past, what was the fate of the material artifacts that had been created by the cult of antifascism?

The most concrete criticisms of this book are, however, the responsibility of publisher, not the author. *AntiFascism and Memory in East Germany* is one of a series published by Oxford University Press that selects from the best D.Phil theses submitted to Oxford University. It is a pity that these are then published at a price that will make them inaccessible to all but academic libraries, and not even all of those. Given that price, moreover, and the range of sources McLellan uses, it is a shame that the book is not enhanced by more extensive illustrations—particularly of the more everyday examples of the commemorative culture that was created. Both these must be matters of disappointment to the author, but they should not dissuade readers from obtaining a copy—perhaps by borrowing, rather than purchasing—of this extremely impressive book.

Notes

[1]. See for instance, Jay Winters, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cul-*

tural History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and, his introduction with Emmanuel Sivan to *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[2]. Alistair Thomson, *ANZAC Memories: Living with the Legend* (Oxford and Melbourne: Oxford Uni-

versity Press, 1994); Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Russia* (London: Granta, 2000); and Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War: The Red Army 1939 to 1945* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).

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