This is an important book that reconsiders how we best think about the era known as “first Francoism,” from 1939 to 1949. The editors, Miguel Ángel Arco del Blanco and Peter Anderson, focus on the deaths of some two hundred thousand Spaniards due to malnutrition in the 1940s. That famine was a direct result of food shortages and poverty caused by General Francisco Franco’s autarkic economic policies for Spain as they emerged as part of his authoritarian dictatorship following the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39. That famine was subsequently “forgotten” in the dictatorship that lasted until 1975.

The first few chapters of this volume, comprising part 1, seek to prove that “famine” is the correct term to be used, for the loss of life was not caused by the burden of the civil war, or by drought, as many Francoists claimed in the years following the famine. Rather, the autarkic policies imposed on the economy meant that the state controlled all production and trade. In reality, these policies halted the growth of Spanish industry and led to serious declines in agricultural production not resolved until 1951-52 when official rationing was imposed. One consequence was a flourishing black market, for those who could afford it. The second chapter by a group of Spanish social and agricultural historians documents an 11.2 percent decline in food consumption from 1933 to 1940 due to a decline in vegetable production that only rebounded by 1950 (p. 42). The chapter further argues that the first two decades of Franco’s rule stopped Spain’s modernization, saw government create artificially low prices, and also saw a decline in both agricultural and industrial production, all a result of the pursuit of autarky. As a result, by 1950, Spain’s GDP per capita was at 55 percent of the Western European average (p. 60). This economic crisis, combined with a nutritional one, led to diagnoses of malnutrition in Spain’s poorest neighborhoods, most notable in a decline of the average height of Spaniards in this era (p. 70).

Parts 2, 3, 4, and 5 shift to social consequences of this situation in Spain. The poor conditions were exacerbated by a huge growth in the population of political prisoners following Franco’s victory in 1939, a point Peter Anderson makes in his discussion of female prisoners in the Madrid prison in Ventas; the population in this prison was 3,500 in April 1939, three times its capacity (p. 87). In general, those who were poorest were disproportionately affected by the famine, as food distri-
bution reflected social and political repression, which reports from the fascist political movement the Falange documented at the time. Rising prices coincided with falling salaries, which resulted in a growth of low-level crime involving food theft and engagement in the black market. Women, especially widows whose husbands had died in the civil war, were often involved in these activities. As a result, in a politicized atmosphere, jails became filled not just with political prisoners, as misery caused all kinds of people to act out. Lara Anderson and Suzanne Dunai each have strong chapters examining the role of food discourse, cookbooks and magazines, and women in the midst of this crisis. Anderson finds that the discourse around food and autarky, encouraging citizens to eat more Spanish food like oranges and rice, was often cast as a patriotic responsibility, to prove the validity of the autarkic policies being imposed. Part of autarky, of course, was to protect Spain from the potential of foreign contagion that trading for foodstuffs might bring. Some of that rhetoric continued into the 1950s, as the famine faded. Dunai examines the role of the CAT (Comisión General de Abastecimientos y Transportes, General Food and Transportation Commission) office, which controlled food production, and its interactions with censors in the production of cookbooks and cooking magazines aimed at housewives. Aided by the Falange and its Women's Section and the Catholic Church, censors made the writing on food and cooking conform to the era of scarcity that existed, encouraging women to get creative with leftovers, among other things. Yet that also existed alongside what Dunai calls “fantasy culinary literature,” which encouraged women to think beyond the circumstances of a life in famine, especially in promoting international cuisine, and which was perhaps more targeted to middle- and upper-class readers who were less affected by the famine.

The final part of the book is a chapter by Claudio Hernández Burgos and Gloria Román Ruiz on the official memory of the famine during the Franco years. It begins with the regime’s accusation that the Second Republic, which collapsed in civil war in 1936, left behind a legacy of poverty due to the collectivization of agriculture and other “Marxist” policies of that government. The authors reveal that the Franco regime was well aware of the conditions throughout Spain and officially attempted not to acknowledge the situation on the ground, setting up the argument that only autarky could move Spain out of its circumstances. Many individual memories, however, cut through this official discourse and remained vibrant in the years following the famine to produce a counternarrative to that of the regime. Many people did not claim to have suffered from hunger but remembered neighbors and relatives who did. The authors suggest that the popular memory of hunger is perhaps underrepresented but is out there.

This book is an excellent collection of research essays meant to put famine front and center when thinking about the early Franco regime and its rule following the civil war. The group of academics is wide ranging and superb, and it is a real compliment to the editors, Arco del Blanco and Anderson, for bringing this work into one volume. This is a significant book for anyone who wishes to understand Spain in the era of the Second World War and 1940s.
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