A Spanish Labyrinth for the International Right

The Spanish Civil War is often interpreted as the "last great cause" of the Left, or, alternatively, as a "dress rehearsal" for the Second World War, one that pitted fascism against democracy; it has also been suggested that it was the first open battle of communism and capitalism.[1] All of these explanations illuminate the importance of ideology; and most of them were expounded upon by those on the Left, especially non-Spaniards, in the aftermath of the Republic's defeat by General Francisco Franco's Nationalists in 1939. Yet if the Civil War really did reflect broader international conflict, surely the Right must have had similar explanations and reminiscences when the battle was finished. Indeed, both sides had their international volunteers who set off for adventure and ideological strife in sunny Spain. We may more easily remember the Orwells of the fight, but Judith Keene skillfully and insightfully reminds us that the war was not purely one that matched patriotic Spaniards against an awkward amalgam of international "Reds". Many on the Right in a variety of European and other countries also joined the battle in Spain, and Keene's *Fighting for Franco* tells their many stories.

Analysis of the international dimension of the conflict in Spain has rightly focused on the larger foreign contribution to the Spanish Republic, primarily in the form of the International Brigades which totaled some 35,000 to 40,000 soldiers (p. 2). On the Nationalist side, the assumption has been that significant foreign involvement was limited to those who were less than volunteers, primarily German, Italian and, to a lesser extent, Portuguese soldiers. These three groups together contributed somewhere between 100,000 and 120,000 soldiers to the Nationalist effort (p. 7). Keene, however, is interested in what she estimates to be the 1200 or so true volunteers for Franco, a varied group of "pious Catholics, crypto-Nazis, aspiring fascists, old-style conservatives and anti-Semites of every stripe" (p. 2). Difficult to track down in the many national and non-state archives Keene has examined, these individuals and groups nonetheless provide an important insight into the nature of interwar politics and society. The real value of this
study is not in making any dramatic claim about the military value of these troops, for that was definitely negligible (p. 293). Rather, Keene highlights the diverse ideological and other motivations for their involvement in Spain, and the benefit this provided for many extreme rightist leaders and organizations back in their own countries. The result is a portrait of a generation, its politics and personal characteristics, and the Spanish context which rarely seemed to live up to expectations.

The book is organized as seven separate essays. The first reviews the general history of the Civil War. From here the essays can be examined in three sets. Two essays on English-speaking volunteers predominantly study individual cases of pro-Nationalist travelers and writers and English-speaking volunteers, although the Irish brigade that fought for Franco is also discussed. The next set of essays focus on individual groups of volunteers, French, White Russian and Romanian; the final chapter is a paper on Franco’s female volunteers. In addition to the small numbers involved, common themes that emerge from a comparative reading of these essays include the political motivations of the volunteers that almost always are defined in terms of their own national context, the personal motivation of “restlessness” that sends many to Spain, the divisions between leaders and rank-and-file, and, most striking, the great difficulty that these foreign volunteers had in ever really getting organized enough to make any sort of contribution to the cause they wanted to fight for.

Volunteers for the franquista cause were driven by their own national political debates, and they interpreted the Civil War in Spain through national lenses. This meant, most often, that the conflict was seen as part of a larger crusade against parliamentarianism, Bolshevism and the Left in general. Thus Keen characterizes the French volunteers, regardless of which extreme right organization they came from, as activists in opposition to the "decadence" of parliamentary republicanism that seemed to favor the Left (p. 137). White Russian volunteers, almost all of whom came from the Paris emigre community and had served in the White armies of the Russian Civil War, saw the Spanish conflict as the first step in a march back to St. Petersburg (p. 197). Perhaps the conflagration of Spain and the national context was strongest in the case of the eight members of the Romanian Iron Guard who volunteered in Spain to defend “Old Kingdom Romania” that seemed to be the ”Castile of the Balkans”–”Catholic, rural, patriotic and united” against the Reds, the Hungarians and the Jews (p. 216). In the writings of pro-Franco women, ”sexually depraved, cross-dressing ‘Reds’” were interpreted as overrunning the countryside (pp. 254, 262). Yet in addition to politics, in their own personal reasons for heading to Iberia, these volunteers echoed their counterparts in the International Brigades, looking for ”adventure”. Writing of one English volunteer, Peter Kemp, a graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge, Keene states that, politics ”were important only so far as they determined on which side he joined up.” Kemp himself wrote of his ”restless temperament” and saw the war as a ”splendid chance” to go out on his own (p. 110).

Once in Spain, the treatment Franco’s foreign volunteers received rarely seemed to live up to their expectations. Individual volunteers like Frenchman Gaston Penaud were not welcome at military headquarters in Nationalist Spain when they managed to get there on their own and in Penaud’s case, he was not directed to the French Joan of Arc battalion; he spent four months in Spain and never saw any action or even found a rifle while hanging around various Nationalist military quarters (pp. 156-157). Similarly, the effort of the one hundred or so White Russians to be recognized as officers and aristocrats with considerable experience from the Russian Civil War was unsuccessful; they were enrolled in Spanish units as regular soldiers and were not permitted to
form a separate Russian unit that might be the basis for a revived Imperial Army (pp. 205-207).

The real value of Spanish involvement, for most of these individuals and groups, came not in Spain but at home. The Iron Guard contingent of eight from Romania had begun as a ceremonial delegation meant to bring greetings to Franco; yet in the course of traveling to Spain the suggestion was made that they volunteer and fight (p. 231). They were enrolled as regular soldiers in the Foreign Legion, and two were killed before they all were permitted to withdraw from service and return to Romania. Their contribution, from a military view, was of little value, and on the whole they were isolated from other soldiers in their division; yet the funeral for the two killed closed down the city of Bucharest in February 1937 (p. 237). Interpreting the benefit of service in Spain as primarily propagandistic rather than as militarily significant did create something of a rift between the leaders of these small bands of adventurers and the rank-and-file. In many cases except the Russian one, the leaders of these groups had very different experiences than their followers. This was due to two factors. First, many of these leaders, as stated, were more interested in their own national situations. Their roles in the foreign volunteer mission, for the most part, were not as military leaders but rather as propagandists who interpreted the Spanish events for other purposes at home. The result was less than focused attention on the actual management of foreign volunteers at the front. Thus they spent a great deal of time traveling through Spain and back-and-forth from Spain to their own countries instead of tending to troops. Charles Maurras and Maxime Real del Sarte, respectively leading members of the Action Francaise and its paramilitary group Camelots du Roi, received “red carpet” treatment in their many visits to Spain, all of which they related to their French audiences at home (p. 151). Yet they did not take leadership over the organization of volunteers. While the Camelots du Roi, as well as other groups like the Croix de Feu, created the Joan of Arc battalion in 1937-8, and recruited in Paris and Algeria, the leadership of this battalion was inexperienced and unorganized, and the military value, as observed General Yague, the head of the Spanish Foreign Legion, was negligible (p. 156). This scenario seemed to be preferred by Franco and his associates. The Nationalist movement courted prominent English-language writers and travelers such as Sir Arthur Lunn, a right-wing Catholic who made two visits to Nationalist Spain escorted by members of Franco’s Press and Propaganda bureau and wrote of his visits in a popular book, Spanish Rehearsal, a “handbook for Franco’s supporters in the English-speaking world” (p. 61). Yet the commander of the six hundred and seventy member Irish Brigade, Eoin O’Duffy, while personally well received by many leading Nationalist generals, had to wait in barracks four months before seeing a month of action in which he disobeyed orders not to retreat; the Brigade voted to leave Spain shortly thereafter, and Nationalist generals did not have any complaints about this course of action (pp. 122-127).

The final essay by Keene on the subject of Franco’s female volunteers is an interesting one. The author had uncovered about a dozen case studies, two from nurses who served on the Nationalist side, the rest from female travelers and writers, publicists for Franco similar in many respects to the narratives of English-speaking male travelers already examined. Keene perceptively contrasts the non-traditional status of these single, upper-class writers and broadcasters, many of whom traveled alone, with the Catholic, Falangist and Nationalist Army interpretation that the ideal place for a woman was in the domestic sphere (p. 246). Even though the exigencies of war propelled Falangist and Nationalist Spanish women into auxiliary services like food and clothing distribution, Keene, citing Victoria de Grazia, argues that the status of women was not as flexible on the ground in Spain as it was in Fascist Italy (p. 246). Yet the evidence Keene presents does not further
the argument along these promising lines. In assessing female publicists such as the American Jane Anderson, later a propagandist for Hitler in wartime Berlin, Keene concludes that their motivations for writing about Spain, and their interpretations of Franco and his movement, and thus their experiences, were similar to the men who came to join the Nationalist crusade. Their arrival in Spain may have ‘transgressed franquista notions’ about women (p. 248), but their experience was grounded in their class status, their fervent anti-Communism and their adventurous nature. Indeed, Keene concludes that “rather like Franco’s other foreign travelers ... these women filtered Spanish events through their own political views and frameworks of meaning which had been formed elsewhere” (p. 283). Obviously sources are limited, but a more detailed exploration of the uncomfortable atmosphere such women encountered in Nationalist territory would have added to the analysis, especially if compared to and contrasted with the disheartening experiences of many of the male volunteers on the ground.

A necessary accompaniment to the literature on the International Brigades, Judith Keene’s book on Franco’s volunteers is also an important addition to the literature on the inter-war Right, for what she offers is a unique comparative study grounded in the common experience of Spain. The varieties of motivation which propelled both the rank-and-file and leaders of these movements to head to Spain is striking. In addition, by examining the contradictory reaction of the Nationalist side to these volunteers, this reviewer would argue that Keene has provided readers with an important insight into the workings of what became a thirty-six year regime. Keene concludes that Franco benefited from pro-Nationalist propaganda that sold his side of the Spanish Civil War to various audiences outside of the Peninsula (p. 293). In dealings with foreign volunteers, who came to Iberia ignorant of Spanish realities and burdened by the baggage of their own national political conflicts, Franco always managed to re-

define his movement in terms they understood, often in international anti-Communist terms. Yet it was clear that within Spain Franco successfully cast himself as a defender of national honor against outside influence, and the treatment of foreign volunteers outside of the Caudillo’s presence suggested that they were not welcomed by most on the Nationalist side. The dual nature of the regime as an internally nationalistic one and as a bulwark against international Communism served Franco well in the years that followed.

Note

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