

Book Review

Julián Casanova, *A Short History of the Spanish Civil War*, Revised Edition, translated by Martin Douch. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Pp. xix + 218. \$19.95 (paper).

Giles Tremlett, *The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020. Pp. 696. \$30.00 (cloth).

In some ways, these new books on the Spanish Civil War could not be more different. Spanish historian Julián Casanova surveys the entire conflict in a scant 175 pages of text, while British journalist Giles Tremlett – a longtime resident of and writer about Spain – devotes 540 pages of text to one important aspect of the war. Casanova organizes his book thematically, with chapters, say, on the religious and anti-religious world-views and actions of the respective sides, while Tremlett presents almost a week-by-week battle history, incorporating political and social history within that chronological narrative. While both rely on a wide range of scholarship, Casanova’s references are almost all to Spanish and English sources, while Tremlett – whose subjects in the International Brigades (IB) came from almost 100 nations to fight on behalf of the Spanish Republic – draws on material in a dozen languages.

But despite their differences in goals, range, and methods, these books contribute in important ways to a common understanding of major themes of the war in Spain, which erupted when portions of that nation’s military officer caste rebelled in July 1936 against the elected Popular Front government. Most significant is that both Casanova and Tremlett characterize as “fascist” the right-wing movement which came to be led by General Francisco Franco, placing it squarely alongside similar dictatorships which arose elsewhere in interwar Europe. Casanova emphasizes that Spain’s influential Catholic Church hierarchy enthusiastically embraced fascist ideals, and that Franco, while keeping Spain’s explicitly fascist Falangist party in a position subordinate to the army, embodied in all practical aspects the figure of a fascist leader. Tremlett,

meanwhile, characterizes the volunteers who fought for Spain's Republic as motivated above all by anti-fascism, even if the Communist International served as the IB's organizational basis. Tremlett frames the 1936 to 1939 war as one part of the larger fight against fascism; thus, while Spanish Republicans and their volunteer allies lost this battle, they were vindicated in part by 1945 with the defeat of Italy and Germany.

This emphasis on fascism and anti-fascism leads to the second major similarity between Casanova's and Tremlett's approaches: the global character of the war. While labeled a civil war, it was "an international war on Spanish soil," as Casanova titles one chapter. Indeed, the military coup would likely have failed entirely if not for intervention in its first weeks by Hitler and Mussolini, whose planes and ships facilitated the transfer of rebel officers and troops from Spanish Morocco to the mainland, and such intervention continued until their victory. Casanova concludes that German and Italian weapons and personnel "played a major, if not decisive, role in the evolution and duration of the conflict and its final result" (81). Tremlett forcefully argues, through his granular attention to individual battles and the balance of forces, that it was only due to aid from these other fascist powers that Franco could win. Bombing by German and Italian planes caused havoc in Republican-controlled cities – in Madrid, Barcelona, and elsewhere, as well as in Guernica, made famous by Pablo Picasso's painting – and the blitzkrieg by foreign-supplied planes and tanks, along with thousands of Italian troops, turned the tide after a temporary military stalemate in eastern Spain in 1938. (While Tremlett's main subject is the 35,000 or so IB fighters, he notes that their numbers were dwarfed by the 75,000 to 90,000 so-called "volunteers" from Mussolini's army on the other side.)

The international character of the war also emerges in both books through attention to the supposed non-intervention policy of Britain, France, and the United States, which Casanova, drawing from Douglas Little's 1985 study of Anglo-American policy, calls "malevolent neutrality" (74). Casanova and Tremlett are most critical of British policy towards the Spanish Republic, which they charge was part and parcel of efforts to appease Hitler and Mussolini, and which was predicated on Tory preference for Spanish right-wing forces over the moderately left-wing government. Spanish Republicans, meanwhile, were determined to continue the war in 1938, despite their diminishing territory, in the hope that developments in Austria, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere would finally impel Britain and France to abandon appeasement. The Munich pact of September 1938, then, "imposed the death sentence," in Casanova's words, not only on Czechoslovakia, but on Spain's Republic, too (113). Tremlett, recounting the disdain prominent IB supporter Ernest Hemingway heaped on this appeasement policy, adds that even in late 1938 Britain's prime minister considered Nazi Germany a welcome "buttress against communism" (495-496).

Of course, the war's global nature also stemmed from the involvement of the IB volunteers. And many of these volunteers, especially those who had already been exiled

from Germany and Italy to France and Belgium, saw their fight in Spain explicitly as the first step towards reclaiming their homelands from fascism. While not all IB volunteers were Communists, the importance of the Comintern in mobilizing these soldiers cannot be disentangled from the fact that the Soviet Union was the only major nation which provided weapons and other aid to the Republic. (Casanova and Tremlett each give only one brief mention to Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas' efforts to support Spanish democracy.) Casanova notes that Soviet aid helped in the successful defense of Madrid against Franco's forces in October 1936, while Tremlett, in his battle accounts, explains that the few Soviet planes available – never as numerous as the opposing German and Italian planes – at times evened out the military balance.

Neither author portrays Soviet aid as unproblematic for the Republic. Casanova explains that some weapons from the Soviet Union were woefully outdated and that Spain paid dearly, in gold, for what they did receive. Tremlett, who reveals that the IB concealed – through pseudonyms and other means – the number of Soviet personnel among its leaders, argues that the failure to confront the contemporary purges in the Soviet Union damaged its prestige. Moreover, the spillover of Stalin's paranoia into the Brigades hurt them operationally, not least through a mania to identify spies and traitors where none existed.

Both Casanova and Tremlett examine tensions within Republican forces which hindered their prosecution of the war. They agree that leftwing Republicans, moderate Socialists, and Communists were correct in insisting – unlike many among Spain's anarchists and anti-Stalinist Marxists – that winning the war against Franco had to take precedence over social revolution. Indeed, Casanova, the author of a 2005 monograph on anarchists and the civil war, quotes a leading German anarchist, Helmut Rüdiger, based in Spain from 1936 to 1938, presciently making the same argument: “if the war is lost, everything is lost, and over the next half century or more there will be no further discussion of the problem of revolution” (97). Casanova also absolves anarchists from the common charge that they were primarily responsible for violence against Catholic clergy and destruction of churches; he points out, too, that Catalanian and Basque movements for regional autonomy harmed Republican prospects.

Tremlett, while highly critical of the IB's demonization of the leftist POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista) as “fascist,” disputes George Orwell's well-known enthusiasm for the group. Tremlett prefers instead the “better informed” appraisal by the equally anti-Stalinist Willy Brandt – the future West German chancellor then in Barcelona – who (in Tremlett's words) “viewed the POUM as absurdly dogmatic and failing to realise that only a popular front could win the war” (305). Tremlett observes that while Republican officials willingly exaggerated the IB's role in defending Madrid in 1936, they later sought to assert more control over its command and operations.

Another common theme is that the intensely ideological nature of the war led to extraordinary brutality. Both authors refer to Paul Preston's exhaustive *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (2012), though both could incorporate Preston's analysis more fully. Casanova and Tremlett acknowledge the anti-Catholic violence by Republicans at war's outset, as well as the killings of some captured soldiers by Republican forces and the IB – atrocities which, they note, hurt the Republic on the world stage. But while the elected government sought to minimize such violence after the first few months, Casanova and Tremlett agree that Franco pursued a deliberate policy of violence against civilians and captured soldiers throughout the war. (Of the estimated 600,000 wartime deaths, about one-fourth were outside of battlefields per se: “100,000 were due to the repression unleashed by the military rebels, and 55,000 due to the violence in the republican zone,” writes Casanova [165].)

Casanova, whose numerous books include *La Iglesia de Franco*, or *Franco's Church* (2001), details Catholic rhetoric supporting what several bishops labeled in August 1936 “a religious crusade” against the “lay-Jewish-Masonic-soviet elements” allegedly controlling the Republic (47). This “holy war” rationalized anything Franco's forces did, even including their own occasional killings of dissident priests and nuns (54, 137). Tremlett emphasizes the prior brutality of Spain's army in Morocco, and the bombing of cities and strafing of refugees by German and Italian planes, as underpinning Franco's “total war” ideology. Tremlett quotes a British nurse serving Franco's army who confided to her diary: “there are 85 prisoners here of the International Brigades, mostly American and some English. They will all be shot as the foreigners always are” (449).

Casanova and Tremlett each devote a final chapter to the war's aftermath, although in both cases these chapters are briefer than would be desirable. Casanova emphasizes Franco's repression, including executions and torture, of erstwhile supporters of the Republic, and the immense suffering of refugees who fled to France, including the transfer of several thousands to Nazi concentration camps in 1940 and 1941. There was no fundamental change in Spain's dictatorship until Franco's death in 1975, Casanova insists, and the chief ideological glue for his regime soon became “the defence of Catholicism,” with the Church regaining “all its institutional privileges” after the brief separation of church and state of the Republican years (173).

Tremlett's last chapter focuses on the continuing activism against fascism of surviving IB soldiers, despite the disorienting impact of the Hitler-Stalin Pact (August 1939-June 1941) and the suffering of many veterans in French internment camps. Pierre Georges, for example, initiated the first armed attack of the French Resistance against German occupying forces in Paris in August 1941, and twenty-nine veterans attained the rank of general in Yugoslavia's partisan army. Tremlett relates similar accomplishments of veterans from Britain, the United States, Poland, Germany, Italy,

and elsewhere, with the transnational ties forged in Spain often facilitating such work. He also chronicles, however, the importance of some veterans in Eastern European Communist dictatorships from the late 1940s to the 1980s, even as Stalin and his acolytes purged others because of supposed contamination by foreign ideas and connections.

Casanova could have written his “Short History” based solely on his own voluminous scholarship, but to his credit he cites a wide range of distinguished authors, including those whose conclusions he disputes. His is not the only book of its kind in English, joining Preston’s *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War* (1996) and Helen Graham’s *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction* (2005). Their perspectives are similar, but with differences of emphasis. Graham, for example, discusses the International Brigades and the Moroccan soldiers in Franco’s army more than Casanova does, and she engages more fully the consequences of the Republic’s failure to address Spanish colonialism in North Africa. This second edition of Casanova’s book is largely a reprint of the 2013 version; the only significant change is a worthwhile new introduction addressing the contentious issue of how Spain remembers and memorializes the war. (Pedro Almodóvar’s 2021 film, *Parallel Mothers*, addressed this theme, reaching both Spanish and foreign audiences.) *A Short History* could serve as a weekly assignment in an advanced course on modern European or world history and as background for instructors looking for a balanced and up-to-date account of the Spain’s civil war.

Tremlett’s tome should find an audience among those for whom the International Brigades remain a touchstone of international solidarity and antifascist activism, although its length and its heavy attention to battle history will likely limit its use as a course text. Instructors who cover the Spanish Civil War will find here innumerable valuable nuggets of social, political, and military history to enliven their courses.

For professors in Anglophone countries, Tremlett’s attention to volunteers from so many nations will broaden the accounts of British, American, and Canadian battalions familiar from such books as Adam Hochschild’s best-selling *Spain in Our Hearts* (2016). (Tremlett devotes less attention to Latin American volunteers than they deserve, however.) We learn here, for example, that several French and German officers who faced each other at Verdun fought side by side two decades later against Franco, and that the Italian Garibaldi Battalion was less Communist-dominated than most, incorporating anarchists and Socialists in a representative “popular front.” Some White Russians whose families had years earlier fled Bolshevism for France and Belgium joined the Brigades in the hope of being able to return to Russia. And then there were the Jewish brothers Emiel and Piet Akkerman, whose family had earlier left Poland for Belgium, and who wrote in 1936 that they were fighting against the “mass murder” they saw on the horizon for Europe from Franco’s uprising and from other fascist powers. The Akkermans, both of whom died in Spain, along with 5,000 or so of their fellow

volunteers, exemplify for Tremlett two key themes: that so many Brigade members had been part of the waves of emigration within and beyond Europe, and that some “Jews had not sat by passively as the Holocaust was prepared” (186).

Tremlett does not shy from detailing the IB’s shortcomings, from incompetent commanders to cowardice under fire of some volunteers, from “friendly fire” casualties to recriminations between national groups for battlefield setbacks. André Marty, the stubbornly Stalinist coordinator of the Brigades who arbitrarily punished phantom saboteurs in its ranks, failed to identify a real spy on his staff, whose willful damage to munitions contributed to IB defeat in several battles. Tremlett liberally cites historians hostile to the Brigades, such as Ronald Radosh, as well as those who are more favorable, such as Peter Carroll. But his overall standpoint is clear: IB volunteers “deserve to be remembered not just by those who sympathise with their mostly leftist politics but by anyone who believes Western democracies were right to fight fascism in the Second World War” (3).

The Spanish Civil War – as a case study of the difficulties of reform and revolution in the 1930s; as an integral event on the road to World War II; and as an instance of interconnections between the local and the global – deserves to be better known among students and the general public alike. These two books – one an analytical synthesis of the literature, and the other a combined military history and extraordinary transnational research effort into the lives of antifascist soldiers from dozens of countries – contribute greatly to that end.

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