

Literary Review

Circulation: 44750
 Readership: 169600
 Display Rate (£/cm²): 4.20

OCT 2012

918

MOOREHEAD

als-at-Arms

Civil War and the Men & Women
 to Fight Fascism

David Boyd Haycock
 (Street 363pp £25)

British in the Spanish Civil War and
 the Fight Against Fascism

Edited by Richard Baxell
 (Aurum Press 516pp £25)

attracted such a concentration of intellectuals. Many of them had visited Spain before and brought with them romantic memories of olive trees and bullfights. They revelled in the huge, hot landscape, the intensity of the political conflict, and the spectacle of revolutionary socialism in action – workers with rifles over their shoulders and cars painted with slogans. The anarchy was alarming, but it was also extremely exciting. ‘All languages are spoken,’ wrote the Austrian Marxist Franz Borkenau, ‘and there is an indescribable atmosphere of political enthusiasm ... Everybody is friends with everybody in a minute.’ In the Hotel Florida in Madrid, Hemingway threw his famous parties and Saint-Exupéry distributed grapefruit. Paul Robeson sang ‘Ol’ Man River’ to the Americans, accompanied by his wife at the piano.

The few writers who questioned the cause were treated with derision. It was in Spain that Martha Gellhorn first uttered her memorable phrase, ‘all that objectivity shit’, arguing that it was morally indefensible to remain neutral when one side was so blatantly in the wrong.

The presence of so many writers led to often waspish, and amusing, exchanges. Stephen Spender described Sylvia Townsend Warner as the ‘Communist lady writer’ who ‘looked like, and behaved like, a vicar’s wife presiding over a tea party given on a vicarage lawn as large as the whole of Republican Spain’. Claud Cockburn spoke of Colonel

‘I know, as surely as I know anything in the world,’ wrote the American reporter Herbert Matthews, many years after returning from the Spanish Civil War, ‘that nothing so wonderful will ever happen to me again as those two and a half years I spent in Spain ... It gave meaning to life; it gave courage and faith in humanity ... There one learned that ... nothing counted, nothing was worth fighting for but the idea of liberty.’ Matthews was one of some 35,000 foreigners who travelled to Spain after Franco began his attack on the elected Republican government, a few of them to report or to observe, but most of them to fight on the Loyalist side. His nostalgia, though shared by others, rings oddly for a war better remembered for its brutality, for its summary executions, reprisals and torture, and for the defeat of the ill-equipped, poorly organised Republican army.

Both David Boyd Haycock’s *I am Spain* and Richard Baxell’s *Unlikely Warriors* focus on the volunteers of the International Brigades, the men – and the few women – from 53 countries who made their way over the Pyrenees in the late 1930s to be organised into units on national lines and fight alongside the Republicans. The idea for these brigades was first talked about at a Politburo meeting in Moscow in the summer of 1936. Although often led by Comintern officers, the recruits saw themselves for the most part simply as anti-fascists, who, having grown up with the unemployment and poverty of the Depression years, believed that the spectre of fascism and the threat of another world war were sufficiently serious to demand that ‘ordinary people ... take extraordinary action’. They were a diverse and ragged crowd, from teenage honeymooners to medical students, miners,

city-bred teachers in horn-rimmed spectacles, public-school boys and anarchists. Few were very fit. ‘I’m having the time of my life here,’ wrote an American girl to her parents, ‘right in the middle of making history.’ Overseen by the Political Commissar André Marty, the ‘sinister and ludicrous’ walrus-moustachioed French veteran of the First World War, they served generally with heroic courage, in spite of their poor weapons, weak officers and ‘wild’ lack of discipline, often in the midst of complete mayhem. It was later described by a German participant as ‘a chaos of tongues, a chaos of organisation, a chaos of illusions’.

With them, arriving on foot, by train or in touring cars, bringing Michelin maps and pistols bought in Paris, came writers, reporters, poets, filmmakers and artists. George Orwell pawned the family silver to pay for the journey. No war had ever



International Brigade Volunteers, 1937: smoking guns

Julio Mangada, one of the few senior officers to remain loyal to the government, as 'some kind of cross between Gandhi and Gandhi's goat'. Both Haycock and Baxell include many enjoyable anecdotes of this kind, and both cover at some length the bitter rivalries between communists and anarchists, and the murderous purges of the Trotskyists.

The exhilaration was not destined to last, for all Hemingway's bravura and his insistence, to the very end, that the war could still be won, if only the US sent aid to the beleaguered Loyalists instead of doing its 'level, crooked, Roman, British-aping, disgusting, efficient best' to prevent them surviving. The Republican army of peasants, factory workers and their foreign volunteers was no match for the professional Nationalist soldiers, backed by German and Italian machine guns, artillery and planes. By 1938 even the most stalwart supporters were having doubts. John Dos Passos was not alone in fearing that he had been wrong about the Russians, and that their 'terror machine' had 'eaten up everything good in the revolution'. By the time the Republic fell, and tens of thousands of refugees were making their

way over the Pyrenees to internment camps in France, some nine thousand volunteers in the International Brigades were dead, and some seven thousand more wounded. The last American to die was Ring Lardner's 24-year-old son, James. Apprehension over events in Czechoslovakia meant that their fate was soon forgotten.

There has been much excellent writing on every facet of the Spanish Civil War, not least by those who served or visited the front as writers. The war spawned a great deal in the way of memoirs, diaries, letters, novels, poetry and art. What neither Baxell nor Haycock has done, disappointingly, is to throw any further light on the non-British or American volunteers, the far larger contingents of French (ten thousand men), Germans and Austrians (five thousand), and the smaller groups of Yugoslavians, Hungarians, Poles, Latvians, Ukrainians, Swedes and even Chinese, though many must have returned home to write and paint. There is virtually no mention of remarkable figures such as Lise Ricol, who had fought on the Berlin barricades and trekked over the mountains to take part in the defence of Madrid, later

becoming a captain in the French Resistance; or the Italian historian and political leader Carlo Rosselli, the Hungarian author Máté Zalka, and the Romanian social scientist Valter Roman, all of whom went home to describe their experiences.

Where both books are at their best is in their coverage of the unknown ordinary men and women who saw in the Spanish conflict some deep conviction of their own. Perhaps most interesting, because previously least known, are Richard Baxell's detailed descriptions of the backgrounds of the individual volunteers, drawn from unpublished diaries and oral histories, and the reception they received on their return home. Deemed by their governments to be 'politically unreliable', many were denied service in the Second World War or even tried for violating the law prohibiting service in a foreign army. In the US, some were labelled 'premature anti-fascists' by the FBI, and later hounded under McCarthy. As a British customs officer at Folkestone put it to a colleague, 'two more bloody Reds back'.

To order these books, see the Literary Review bookshop on page 43

KEITH LOWE

Revenge & Repercussions

Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War

By R M Douglas

(Yale University Press 486pp £28)

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the new authorities in eastern Europe embarked on one of the greatest acts of ethnic cleansing in history. German families and communities across the region were rounded up, dispossessed, robbed and finally expelled from their countries. It is estimated that up to three million Germans were shunted out of Czechoslovakia's Sudentenland in this way. Up to nine million were likewise expelled from East Prussia, Pomerania and Silesia when these German territories were awarded to Poland after the war. Perhaps another two million were ejected from Yugoslavia, Romania, and other parts of eastern Europe.

These expulsions were almost always accompanied by cruelty and extreme hardship. In the early days, whole communities were given just an hour to gather their belongings before being rounded up and force-marched to the border. Along the way they were beaten, raped and robbed – often repeatedly – before being abandoned to fend for themselves in the German borderlands. Later, when a semblance of organisation was brought to the process, they were gathered together in concentration camps – an emotive term that was deliberately used by the people who set them up. Here they were routinely mistreated, often in ways that consciously

emulated Nazi brutality. In some respects they were treated worse than the inmates of German camps had been: women were sexually abused with a regularity, and on a scale, that the racially separatist Nazis would never have allowed. When these people were finally sent across the border to Germany, they were inclined to see their expulsion as a lucky escape.

As R M Douglas explains in *Orderly and Humane*, his new book about the expulsions, had such crimes been perpetrated upon any community other than Europe's ethnic Germans, they would now be common knowledge. And yet, outside Germany itself, it is a subject that remains relatively obscure. The reason Douglas gives for this strange silence is that no nation has any particular interest in exploring its own involvement too deeply. Those who carried out the expulsions are understandably reticent about the atrocities they committed, preferring to concentrate on their own victimhood at the hands of the Germans during the war. The Allies who facilitated