

Idealism in the breach

The Unlikely Warriors: the British in the Spanish civil war and the struggle against fascism

Richard Baxell

AURUM PRESS, 528PP, £25

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I am Spain: the Spanish civil war and the foreigners who went to fight fascism

David Boyd Haycock

OLD STREET, 400PP, £25

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Franco's International Brigades: adventurers, fascists, and Christian crusaders in the Spanish civil war

Christopher Othen

HURST, 256PP, £15.99

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The Spanish civil war was not the Catholic Church's finest hour. It unerringly took the side of dictatorship against democracy. Not every Catholic supported this line, but the hierarchy allowed, even encouraged, General Franco to present himself as a Christian crusader holding back the forces of the Antichrist and Communism. In fact, Franco was happy to strike bargains with potential allies of any religion: as Christopher Othen points out, he bought the loyalty of his Moroccan troops partly by enforcing sharia law in Morocco.

What did those Moroccans think they were fighting for? Islam? Self-government for Morocco, half-promised by Franco? An ideology? The future of Spain was certainly not at the front of their minds. Spain was the battleground, but for them, and for the great majority of the foreign soldiers who crowded into the country, Spain was not the issue. They came to fight for Communism, for fascism, for Naziism, for social democracy, for Catholicism, for royalism, for anarchism, or perhaps for a combination of two or three of these causes. Some were in Spain for excitement, a few to avoid difficult conversations with the police at home.

Richard Baxell writes of one typical volunteer for the International Brigades, fighting on the side of Republican Spain:

"Maurice Levine graduated from fighting Mosley's Blackshirts on the streets of London to fighting Franco's soldiers on the battlefields of Spain." His *Unlikely Warriors* covers well-trodden ground: the story of British volunteers who went to Spain to fight for the republic, some (but not all) of them answering a call from the Communist International and recruited by Britain's Communist Party. There is real idealism here and some wonderfully attractive and heroic characters, such as John Cornford, a good-looking, clever Oxford student who was killed in Spain; or Jack Jones, who went on to become Britain's most powerful and most respected trade union leader, dying three years ago aged 96.

Baxell brings something new to this familiar material: detachment. The volunteers were, by and large, brave and idealistic, but there is a dark side to their story, in particular the trench warfare – and sometimes open warfare – between those their enemies would call Stalinists, and those their enemies would call Trotskyists. We meet the dreadful André Marty, the French Communist leader with a taste for executing anyone who disputed the correct line as laid down by Moscow.

Well researched and luminously written, Baxell's book shows us what these volunteers were like – their grand heroism and their petty hatreds, the miseries they endured, the awfulness of war. It includes several stories I had not heard before,

including a marvellous one about Hewlett Johnson, the "Red Dean" of Canterbury, who did not know that his Madrid hotel room had previously been used by a prostitute much in favour among the volunteers, and thought the young men who knocked on his door were in the hope of wise words of counsel and courage.

David Boyd Haycock's *I Am Spain* focuses on artists and writers, mostly British and American, who fought or worked for Republican Spain: Orwell, Hemingway, Cornford, Martha Gellhorn, Stephen Spender – and John Dos Passos, who had visited Spain before the war and had seen it coming. It was not, Dos Passos wrote, just a war between conflicting ideologies, but between rich and poor. Watching a left-wing rally in Santander, he saw "the hatred in the faces of the well-dressed people seated at the cafe tables". There is a lot about John Cornford, including some moving extracts from his letters to his lover, Margot Heinemann. We find out the stupid reasons the Communist leader Harry Pollitt had for rejecting Orwell's services and we get an interesting account of the American volunteers. It's an enjoyable book, but Haycock has given himself a larger canvas to

draw upon than Baxell, and seems to concentrate on a few corners of it. His book does not have Baxell's depth of research, and it is not as well printed. When they each use the same picture, the difference in reproduction quality is painfully obvious.

The least trodden ground is the story of the foreigners who fought for Franco. We know a fair amount about the thousands of Moroccans, Germans, Italians and Portuguese, few of whom could properly be called volunteers, but while *Franco's International Brigades* gives an account of them, Christopher Othen is mainly concerned, as it says in his subtitle, with the "adventurers, fascists and Christian crusaders" who volunteered from other countries. The numbers are comparatively small. Franco had thousands of trained professional soldiers, and did not feel much in need of enthusiastic volunteers. The tiny British contribution – between 30 and 50, according to Othen – consisted largely of upper-class oddities fleeing bankruptcy, depression or alcoholism. They included Noel Skeffington-Smyth, who had run a riding school in Buckinghamshire after an undistinguished career at Sandhurst, where his CO had written: "No man would ever

follow this officer, except out of idle curiosity." But it was a handful of well-placed Englishmen who had made Franco's rebellion possible, by arranging to fly the Generalissimo from the Canary Islands to Spanish Morocco in July 1936, so that he could take charge of



The POUM militia (George Orwell is circled)

the army of Africa. These included the devout Catholic Douglas Jerrold, editor of *The English Review*, recruited to the conspiracy by the head of the Nationalists' press office, Luis Bolín, whose perfect English had been learned at Stonyhurst, the Jesuit school in Lancashire where many of Franco's key officers had been educated.

The largest contingent of volunteers on Franco's side – 700 strong – was from Ireland. The Irish Brigade was recruited by the former IRA leader and police commissioner General Eoin O'Duffy who, if he had managed to stay clear of fascism and booze, might have become his country's Prime Minister. Spain was supposed to rescue O'Duffy's political career but, as Othen explains, "the Irish had served their purpose in cementing Carlist (Royalist) support for Franco's leadership bid and their actual presence in Spain would only complicate matters." They were sent home in June 1937. Othen is a clear and thoughtful guide to this odd aspect of the war, and commendably avoids editorialising.

These three new books, especially Baxell's, introduce for a new generation the story of how men rushed to Spain to fight their own wars back home. **Francis Beckett**

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