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Go and get killed, comrade

Gideon Lewis-Kraus

Unlikely Warriors: The British in the Spanish Civil War and the Struggle against Fascism
by Richard Baxell.
Aurum, 516 pp., £25, September 2012, 978 1 84513 697 0

I Am Spain: The Spanish Civil War and the Men and Women Who Went to Fight Fascism
by David Boyd Haycock.
Old Street, 363 pp., £25, October 2012, 978 1 908699 10 7

In the introduction to the third revision of what was once called *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War* – it's no longer said to be concise – Paul Preston points out that this prelude to the Second World War has generated as many books as the Second World War itself. During the Cold War, with the CIA busy collaborating with anarchists and Trotskyists to try to obscure 'the fact that Hitler, Mussolini, Franco and Chamberlain were responsible for the Nationalist victory, not Stalin', it made sense that foreigners continued to fight the war out in print. The unabated rehearsal of the conflict since then is harder to account for. Preston suggests various reasons: the sheer length of time that Franco remained in power, along with the tolerance of his regime by democratic governments; the parallels between what happened in Spain and national liberation struggles in Vietnam, Cuba, Chile and Nicaragua; and the hope that in the Spanish experience we might find 'the idealism and sacrifice so singularly absent from modern politics'.

The idea that it was 'the last great cause' is echoed in the reminiscences of the international volunteers quoted in Richard Baxell's exhaustive study, *Unlikely Warriors: The British in the Spanish Civil War and the Struggle against Fascism*. John Bassett, who served in the International Brigades for nine months, from March 1938 until they were disbanded that December, articulates the last-great-cause attitude better than anyone: 'Never again will men of every creed and tongue go to war with the ideals with which the volunteers went to Spain. It was indeed a time of hope, when a man with a rifle had some power to divert the tide of human affairs … Men will never go to war like that again, for war will never be as simple.' Baxell uses Bassett's words as the epigraph to his epilogue and as flap copy. But what he writes about is the contradiction between the notion that the war was 'simple' and the reality of the conflict. It wasn't the last time a man with a rifle had some power to divert the tide of human affairs, but it was probably the last time a lot of Englishmen with rifles allowed themselves the exhilaration of that belief.

The story of the Spanish Civil War is one of disillusionment. That was Orwell's model and it hasn't been superseded. Orwell arrived in Barcelona as a reporter for the *New Leader* in December 1936, and what he saw – 'a town where the working class was in the saddle', where men and women wore blue overalls, looked one another in the eye and said *tu* – struck him as 'worth fighting for'. He ended up on the front in Aragon somewhat by chance. Harry Pollitt, the general secretary of the British Communist Party, had flatly denied his request to join the

International Brigades: his accent and background made him politically suspect. The International Labour Party had set up an office in Barcelona that October in support of its quasi-Trotskyist sister organisation, the POUM. John McNair, the ILP representative, wasn't sure he wanted Orwell around either but, aware of his fame, escorted him to the POUM barracks, where he was perfunctorily trained before being shipped west. After four months at the front, he arrived back in Barcelona in time for the 'civil war within the civil war', the Communist assault on the city's anarchist-held telephone exchange. Soon afterwards, the POUM was banned and its leader, Andrés Nin, murdered. As soon as Orwell returned, he noticed that Barcelona had changed: it no longer seemed to be a city controlled by its workers: private cars were back on the streets; quail could be bought.

Orwell understood that he would have felt disenchanted whenever he came back:

> Everyone who has made two visits, at intervals of months, to Barcelona during the war has remarked upon the extraordinary changes that took place in it. And curiously enough, whether they went there first in August and again in January, or, like myself, first in December and again in April, the thing they said was always the same: that the revolutionary atmosphere had vanished. No doubt to anyone who had been there in August, when the blood was scarcely dry in the streets and militia were quartered in the smart hotels, Barcelona in December would have seemed bourgeois; to me, fresh from England, it was liker to a workers' city than anything I had conceived possible.

There were two different sorts of demoralisation: the spiritual sort felt by those, like Orwell, who saw the revolutionary cause undermined by Moscow; and the military sort felt by those, again like Orwell, who saw right away that the Republican side was irremediably ill-equipped. The first was much written about during the Cold War. The second is Baxell's concern: his book provides an episodic history of troop morale. Spanish Republicans were fighting for their own survival, as were those from Germany, Italy and Eastern Europe, who had already lost the battle with Fascism at home. But from the beginning, the British – around 2500 of them, of whom more than five hundred were killed – believed they were on the side of justice, and that justice would prevail.

The volunteers weren't a particularly coherent group. Baxell dispenses with the myth that they were drawn from the Depression unemployed. Most of them were working-class, however: miners or longshoremen or construction workers. Three-quarters were Party members, but trade-unionists and other 'deviationists' were often accepted. The average age was just under thirty. Some had military experience, though it wasn't always the useful kind: 'Manchester volunteer Walter Greenhalgh, for example, had served in the Territorial Army, but had done so as a drummer and the value of his expertise was probably limited.' Many were veterans of the 1931 naval mutiny at Invergordon, or the hunger marches of the early 1930s, or the skirmishes with Mosley and the British Union of Fascists. When the rebel generals rose against the Republican government in July 1936, many agreed with Randolph Churchill that 'for the general public it's just a bunch of bloody dagoes killing each other' – but the workers, students, writers and artists involved in domestic political movements saw the fight in Spain as a continuation of their own struggle. As the South African sculptor Jason Gurney put it,

> The Spanish Civil War seemed to provide the chance for a single individual to take a positive and effective stand on an issue which appeared to be absolutely clear. Either you were opposed to the growth of Fascism and you went out to fight it, or you acquiesced in its crimes and were guilty of permitting its growth … for myself and many others like me it was a war of principle, and principles do not have a national boundary.

These men went to help Spain because their leaders wouldn't. In August 1936, 28 countries signed a non-intervention pact overseen by the British government. Germany and Italy ignored it with impunity. By the end of the month, it was clear that, as Soviet intelligence in Spain reported with alarm to the Politburo, amateur militias – 'some of whom were accustomed to heading off home at the end of the day' – were unlikely to be able to fend off the trained Nationalist troops, particularly Franco's Army of Africa, without assistance. The Comintern was the only international organisation with the reach to recruit and organise a people's army, but most of the volunteers who passed through Paris – the assembly point – thought of themselves as anti-Fascists, not Communists. The non-intervention pact made service in a foreign army illegal, so British recruiters had to work in secret; some families learned that a relative had volunteered only when they got a postcard. British volunteers often left Victoria Station with a weekend return to Paris – a ticket that didn't require a passport. Once in Paris, they found that taxi drivers didn't need directions to the supposedly secret rendezvous. Many of them visited brothels and drank prodigiously before they were sent down to Perpignan, before hiking across the Pyrenees. They arrived at the ridge that marked the Spanish border at sunrise: they sang the 'Internationale' and were overcome with emotion. The train to Barcelona was so slow they could jump down into the orange groves, throw fruit to their comrades, and get back on board. In Barcelona they were greeted by a tumult of brass bands and sloganeering. From there they were sent to Albacete.

Albacete was the base for the International Brigades, which were officially formed in October 1936. The town was famous for the manufacture of knives and daggers, and didn't endear itself to the arriving volunteers. One Irish volunteer called it 'a haven for deserters, saboteurs, black marketers, spies, fifth columnists and rumour mongers. It was the most demoralising place in Spain.' Their training didn't do much to improve their spirits; arms were in such short supply that hardly anyone ever got to practise with live ammunition. ('We wandered over the fields and then we had a long walk and that was the training.') Communication problems among the two dozen nationalities only made things harder; Italians, Poles and Frenchmen grumbled about the proper direction for the about-turn, coming together only to complain about the food drowning in oil. Eventually they learned to march in step. They all received black berets, but the rest of their uniform, though promised, never materialised. They were shipped off to defend Madrid with two thin blankets apiece, along with a groundsheet that was also supposed to work as a cape. 'No doubt it is a very useful garment,' one volunteer wrote, 'but there is no possible means of wearing it without looking like a moth-eaten bird with a broken wing.' They were each allocated five rounds of ammunition. But, as one French Communist deputy told them in farewell, 'What you lack in weapons you will make up for in courage.'

Orwell thought this was baloney. The opinions of the other volunteers, once they got to the front, varied, and Baxell juxtaposes them nicely. He quotes a political commissar called Bill Rust: 'It was a glorious adventure to help the Spanish people crush the revolt and, whipped up by the surging enthusiasm of those days, a hundred or so virile youngsters from half a dozen different countries cheerfully fought against black reaction and military dictatorship.' The young Marxist intellectual John Cornford was rather more self-possessed: 'I came out with the

intention of staying a few days, firing a few shots, and then coming home. It sounded fine, but you just can't do things like that. You can't play at civil war, or fight with a reservation you don't mean to get killed. It didn't take long to realise that either I was here in earnest, or else I'd better clear out.'

Barricaded in at University City, defending the western fringe of Madrid from one of Franco's first assaults on the capital, one of Cornford's men wrote that 'here we discussed art and literature, life and death and Marxism during the long day, and as the evening drew on, we sang. Nothing delighted John more than the sort of crude community singing that is common to undergraduate parties and public bars alike.' One day a volunteer was reading de Quincey on the Lake Poets when he heard an 'appalling crash' and saw Cornford bleeding from a head wound. They'd been hit by a Republican anti-aircraft shell. Cornford's head was wrapped in a turban-like bandage, which led someone to remark that he 'looked the complete wounded hero, very romantic and all that'. They were interested in the look of things. Captain George Nathan was a former British army lieutenant described by Stephen Spender as 'an elegant, cane-swaggering, likeable type of adventurous Jew'; he'd first appeared in Albacete in 'an old sweater and cheap shoes', but once he was made an officer he was transformed. His 'chin-strap was at the correct angle, and we detected a clearer ring to his obviously acquired upper-class accent'.

But all of this good fellowship was little help when it came to the actual fighting. Captain Nathan's No. 1 Company was sent, on Christmas Eve 1936, to the Cordoba front to capture the town of Lopera, but 'it was a waste of time using rifles against planes.' Cornford, whom Baxell sees as the 'epitome of the heroic Byronic volunteer', was killed there; his white bandage made him an easy target for a Moroccan sniper. (The best contribution Spender could make to the war effort, Pollitt told him, wasn't to write about it but to 'go and get killed, comrade – we need a Byron in the movement.') The No. 1 Company went to Lopera with 145 men, and returned to Albacete in January with 67. There they were reorganised, along with a few hundred new recruits, into the British Battalion of the 15th International Brigade.

The British Battalion entered the battle of Jarama, east of Madrid, with 'totally unrealistic optimism'. They did manage to stop the Nationalists' advance, but lost a third of their men on the first day of battle alone. Jarama, Baxell writes, 'provided a brutal wake-up call for those who had naively believed that the rightness of their cause would ensure victory'. The rest of Baxell's book, and the rest of the war, is one wake-up call after another: at Brunete, at Teruel, and on the Ebro.

The story has a tragic monotony. Every page of Baxell's book has some reference to how depressing, dispiriting or tedious something was. The International Brigades had a dual power structure, like the Red Army: as well as military leaders there were political officers. Their job was to enforce discipline, and to try to motivate the volunteers. But their efforts, like the training the volunteers received, were 'more symbolic than practical, designed mainly to keep the volunteers occupied and shore up their morale'. It was quickly clear to many brigadiers that this was beside the point. The most profound longing to fight Fascism couldn't do much against Messerschmitts and Stukas. Morale was the only thing it seemed possible to control. This recognition produced some of the best writing that came out of the war. Jason Gurney, the sculptor, wrote about the significance of the grenade. Its operation was

> perfectly simple – if you had time enough, if it was a fine day and the tinder had not got damp, if the piece of fuse had not become unravelled, and all the other ifs that made it an utterly impracticable weapon. The only advantage of it was as a morale builder, particularly with the bright yellow tinder cord braided up and worn over the shoulder like an aiglet.

Realpolitik, or to be more precise, the farce of non-intervention, ensured that the Republicans never had a chance. Unity or organisation or discipline or lack thereof were immaterial. They didn't have arms, air support, trained soldiers. The Spanish government might well have been able to fight off the rebels on its own – especially before Mussolini lent Franco the planes he needed to bring his Army of Africa across the straits – if it had been able to buy arms from other countries, but it couldn't prevail against the combined efforts of the Germans (who perfected the Blitzkrieg in Spain), the Italians and 75,000 Moroccan soldiers. The only reason the war went on as long as it did was that Franco sought not victory but *limpieza*, 'cleansing'. With the larger story clear, writers have turned to the detail. Baxell draws painstaking miniatures of the uncontroversial heroism of doomed men. It's beyond history; it's myth.

David Boyd Haycock's *I Am Spain: The Spanish Civil War and the Men and Women Who Went to Fight Fascism* is a good example of where this Civil War mythology tends to wind up. He replaces Baxell's careful scholarship with broad-brush sentimentality. They tell many of the same stories – about the baby who raised her fist at the passing brigadiers, say – but Haycock's book is mostly an occasion to dilate on the heroics of Hemingway and Orwell.

Hemingway so liked the ringside seat at the *corrida* that he was keen to get to Madrid for a ringside seat at an actual war. He was delayed, however, by the need to finish *To Have and Have Not*, which he started in Madrid in 1933, and was working on in Key West during the July 1936 rising. He worried that the fighting might be over before he could get there: 'I hate to have missed this Spanish thing worse than anything in the world,' he wrote that September to his editor, Maxwell Perkins. But he had to go to Wyoming to finish his book without distraction. In December, when Orwell arrived in the country, Hemingway wrote again to Perkins: 'I've *got* to get to Spain. But there's no great hurry. They'll be fighting for a long time and it's cold as hell around Madrid now!' Instead, he bankrolled two young volunteers. He sailed himself in February 1937, having arranged for the North American Newspaper Alliance to syndicate his dispatches to sixty US and Canadian newspapers. He went from Paris to Toulouse by train, then was flown to Alicante, where 'a particularly unattractive, very mature dwarf out of Velázquez put into a suit of blue dungarees' chauffeured him the seven hours to Madrid.

In the capital Hemingway put up at the Hotel Florida, the hub of the international press: Claud Cockburn was there, as was Herbert Matthews of the *New York Times*, and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Hemingway wrote to the young reporter Martha Gellhorn, whom he'd met in a Key West bar, and told her to come. Gellhorn couldn't get press credentials and had to cross the Pyrenees on foot. When she turned up in dark, cold Madrid, Hemingway greeted her with the line, 'I knew you'd get here, daughter, because I fixed it so you could.'

Hemingway thought the city at war was 'the greatest thing I've ever seen in my life'. In the besieged capital, he 'discovered what a man is really like in his three fundamental parts: his head, his heart and his balls'. Hemingway's high morale made him generous; his stores of ham, bacon, eggs, coffee, whisky, and swagger made his hotel room the place to be. When he could get away from the city, he would take his gun and hunt hare and partridge, which his maid would cook for him. Like Nathan or Cornford, he felt he had to rise to the occasion: 'After the

first two weeks in Madrid I had an impersonal feeling of having no wife, no children, no house, no boat, nothing.' When he visited the front at Jarama, not everyone was impressed. Jason Gurney wrote that Hemingway was 'full of hearty and bogus bonhomie'. 'He sat himself down behind the bullet-proof shield of a machine-gun and loosed off a whole belt of ammunition in the general direction of the enemy. This provoked a mortar bombardment for which he did not stay.'

Hemingway began to help Joris Ivens, a Dutch documentary film-maker, with a film putting the case for intervention, to be shown to Western leaders. John Dos Passos, a friend of Hemingway's who had spent time in Spain at the end of the First World War, came to help. 'Dos' went to Valencia, the provisional capital of the Republic, to seek the assistance of José Robles, a friend he'd met in 1916 who spoke fluent Russian and had offered to act as interpreter for a Russian general. When Dos Passos arrived in Valencia, he found that Robles had been arrested the week before. He could learn nothing of the charges. He went on to Madrid, where Hemingway warned him not to ask any more questions: he was concerned that an inquiry would make them all suspect in the eyes of the Party. Hemingway found out that Robles had been executed by a 'special section' of the Party; they accused him of discussing military plans in public, but he was probably killed because of his perceived political unreliability. Hemingway was asked to call Dos Passos, who was aghast that Hemingway blithely accepted Robles's guilt. 'What's one man's life at a time like this?' Hemingway asked. Dos Passos, enraged by 'romantic American Communist sympathisers' who were willing to believe that Robles had been a Fascist spy, left Madrid. Hemingway contemptuously suggested it was out of fear of the shelling; Dos Passos was equally contemptuous of Hemingway's affection for the war.

Dos Passos arrived in Barcelona as a guest of the POUM just a few days before the events that would lead to its suppression. Charles Orr, the POUM attaché, set up a meeting with Andrés Nin. Orr had wanted to bring Orwell along, but he worried about dragging 'this husband of my secretary, this militiaman – in his baggy, tan coverall uniform – into a private interview' with the POUM leader. Orwell was left standing in the hallway. Dos Passos didn't know who Orwell was, but much later he wrote about their exchange. 'Things I've heard,' Orwell said, 'lead me to believe that you are one of the few who understands what's going on.' The feeling was mutual. Orwell 'seemed inexpressibly weary. We didn't talk for very long, but I can still remember the sense of assuagement, of relief from strain I felt at last to be talking to an honest man.'

Hemingway believed the Communist propaganda that claimed the POUM were Fascist collaborators. He was similarly swayed in his view of the British, calling the British Battalion 'the absolute scum of the brigades': 'After the Jarama fight they deserted by whole companies; they were cowards, malingerers, liars and phonies and fairies.' Haycock describes his opinions as 'occluded'. He adds that for Orwell, as for Hemingway, it was the British government that 'carried most responsibility for the defeat of the Spanish Republic'. The Civil War is a story that everyone involved – everyone, that is, except the Fascists and Chamberlain – can be in the right about.

Letters

Vol. 35 No. 5 · 7 March 2013

Gideon Lewis-Kraus makes a few errors in his piece about the Spanish Civil War (*LRB*, 21 February). The Germans didn't 'perfect the Blitzkrieg in Spain'. The 'lightning war' required a good road system, which is why it worked in France but not in Russia. Lewis-Kraus is presumably thinking of the term 'blitz', which was misapplied to the air attacks on London in 1940, but which could be applied, retrospectively, to the German and Italian attack on Guernica of 26 April 1937.

Messerschmitt fighter-bombers played only a small part in the German Condor Legion. Some prototype models arrived in 1936, but most got there in 1939, too late to be used in the fighting. The seven hundred or so Italian aircraft were mainly Fiat CR.32 fighters and Savoia-Marchetti bombers. The archetypal Nazi attack aircraft was the Stuka, as Lewis-Kraus says, but with its single bomb and 'Jericho trumpet' siren, it was more effective as a terror weapon. Deployed where it did not have undefended airspace, it was very vulnerable to fighter attack.

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The drift of Gideon Lewis-Kraus's piece about the Spanish Civil War is that it was 'one wake-up call after another', in which the untrained, poorly armed volunteers had their optimism shattered by the reality of battle (*LRB*, 21 February). The tone is one of disillusionment. The Loyalist side of the Spanish Civil War was my first 'cause', at age ten or 11, because my favourite cousin, Coleman (Charlie) Persily, fought on various fronts with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Over the years I've spoken to Cousin Charlie and other American 'Lincolnistas' and found their youthful commitment unchanged. Maybe it's old guys putting a romantic gloss on a bad experience. Or maybe, even in the face of the Loyalists' ugly factionalism and incompetent leadership, they believed in the Republic despite everything. I found these ageing guys full of piss, vinegar and militant optimism. Happy to have survived, happy to have been there.

Clancy Sigal
Los Angeles

Vol. 35 No. 7 · 11 April 2013

Gideon Lewis-Kraus states that Harry Pollitt turned down Orwell's request to join the International Brigades (*LRB*, 21 February). In fact, Orwell wasn't prepared to make a decision about joining the Brigades until he had been to Spain and seen for himself what was happening there: his request to Pollitt was for some kind of Communist Party documentation that would get him into the country. None of the other volunteers asked for any such privilege, and it isn't surprising that Pollitt refused to help him. It wasn't until the spring of 1937, after he'd become disillusioned with the POUM militia, that Orwell requested a transfer to the Brigades. By then, however, he would have been marked down as 'politically unreliable' and so was still serving with the POUM in 'the civil war within the Civil War' in May 1937.

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