

CURRENT BOOKS

Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction

Who Lost Spain?

SPAIN BETRAYED:

The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War.

Edited by Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck, and Grigory Sevostianov.

Yale Univ. Press. 576 pp. \$35

Reviewed by Christopher Hitchens

When Winston Smith first breaks off from reading the forbidden text in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), he reflects that the best books are the ones that tell you what you already know. I had a distantly comparable feeling on closing this volume. In a sense, I had always known that George Orwell was right in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938): Stalinism in Spain had been not an ally of the Republic and the revolution, but a fatal metastasis of an already lethal Soviet despotism. Yet Orwell's awareness of this had been partial and improvised, based on the data of personal experience and a combination of insight and instinct. As a result, he had gone to his grave in 1950—almost writing himself into it with the effort of producing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—more than half convinced that historical truth could never be salvaged from the ordure and mendacity heaped over it. This feeling, acquired in Barcelona while he was a volunteer in the anti-Fascist militia, had never left him. But now there is a Plaza George Orwell near the Barcelona waterfront, and—as the Stalinist show-trial convenors used to say—we have the documents and the confessions that vindicate him.

By a nice irony, these documents and confessions are supplied directly from the Stalinist sources themselves. A fair amount of instant history and sensational disclosure has resulted from the hasty or partial opening of

Soviet archives since the implosion of the USSR; it is good to be able to report that this volume, by contrast, is coherent and consistent, and has been prepared by professional scholars in two countries and three languages. The verdict is in: Everything that was ever suspected about the Comintern line in Spain turns out to have been true.

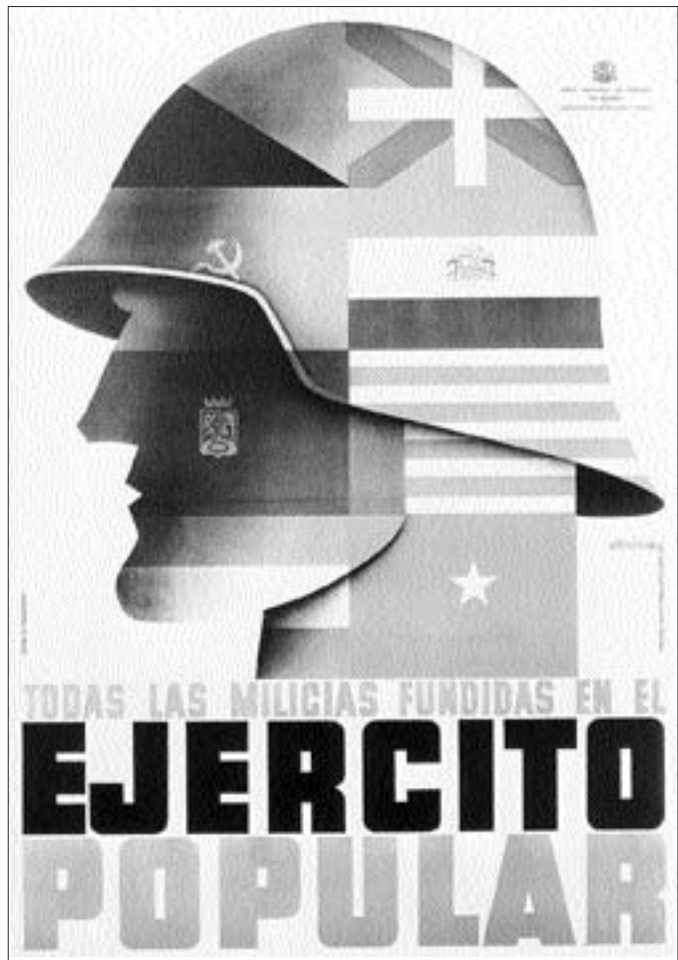
According to the conventional view, the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) was a tangle of factions and alliances, idealism and duplicity. Francisco Franco's Fascists had the support of Italy and Germany. Opposing Franco, the Republican Popular Front was aided by the Soviet Union and the International Brigades of volunteers. With time, the Republicans splintered. The anti-Stalinist Marxists supported an immediate workers' revolution, but the Communists insisted that revolution be postponed until after Franco's defeat—the line laid down by Stalin, the Republicans' putative ally. Orwell, however, suspected, as he wrote in *Homage to Catalonia*, that the Communists were seeking “not to postpone the Spanish revolution till a more suitable time, but to make sure that it never happened.”

Unearthing the truth is no mere antiquarian task. The argument about Spain is probably the one argument from the age of 20th-century ideology that is still

alive. You cannot any longer get into a hot-eyed, friendship-breaking dispute over collectivization, or the Moscow trials, or the Hitler-Stalin pact; all the essential concessions were made years ago, and the toxicity has leached out of the controversies. Yet I have seen people become seriously agitated in tussles over the American volunteers in the anti-Franco Abraham Lincoln Battalion, and have myself come close to blows in exchanges over the anti-Stalinist Marxist party, the POUM. (Indeed, for a while I was not on speaking terms with Ronald Radosh, one of the editors of this volume, because he had rashly told an interviewer, "I think it's fine that Franco won." We resumed conversations only after he said he regretted the remark.) To many people even on the merely liberal left, the Popular Front policy in Spain is the holiest of the old causes. Their illusion received a second life in the 1950s, when the less polished elements of the American Right accused those who had borne arms for the Spanish Republic of aiding Sovietism.

The evidence assembled here demonstrates that, to phrase it dialectically, the Soviet Union actually guaranteed Franco's victory. In cold print and in the words of the perpetrators, we learn how Moscow exploited the weakness of its Republican ally in order to fleece it through one-sided arms deals, how it sequestered Spain's gold reserves, and how it planted its own agents or nominees throughout the military and security services of the embattled Popular Front.

Some orthodox historians—most notably Paul Preston, but also Hugh Thomas—have for many years advanced the apparently commonsensical view that communism in



A propaganda poster supporting the Republican cause.

Spain furnished discipline, organization, and weaponry, the preconditions for a successful wartime strategy. In this view, dissension in the anti-Franco ranks and at the rear was at best a distraction, one that belonged in the province of disaffected intellectuals. Over the years, however, these disaffected intellectuals, especially Victor Alba and Stephen Schwartz, have accumulated a body of evidence and argument that points in a diametrically opposite direction. Stalin and his surrogates, by fighting harder against the enemy within—principally the Catalan left opposition—than against Franco, put their own interests ahead of the survival of democracy, and exhibited the tendencies that were to become explicit in the Hitler-Stalin treaty that followed the eclipse of Spanish resistance.

I looked first in this volume at the documents about events familiar to me. There's no

room for doubt about the event Orwell described in *Homage to Catalonia*, the attempted Communist coup against the Republican government in Barcelona in May 1937. Far from being a spontaneous reaction to disorder, it was a carefully choreographed attempt to provoke a crisis and then take advantage of it. It is weirdly fascinating to read the letters sent from Spain to the desk of Marshal Voroshilov in Moscow, coldly analyzing the obstacles to a successful putsch. (There seems a high probability that this is the deadly prose of André Marty, the French Comintern agent whose reptilian character was caught by Ernest Hemingway in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.)

A succeeding document would have interested Orwell very much if he had lived to see it. Regretting the failure of the party's initial plan, the author of the document tells Moscow of the need for a show trial of the Trotskyists and other subversive elements, along the lines of the macabre charade already enacted in the Soviet Union. (From Soviet secret police documents published by Alba and Schwartz, we already know that potential defendants before such a tribunal included Orwell and his wife.) There are

moments when documents seem to speak aloud: I am still reeling from this one.

The survivors of the International Brigades publish a journal that presumably will have to review this volume; it will be interesting to see how they confront the frigid cynicism of the archive. It is clear that the brave volunteers were repeatedly and systematically manipulated, and their reputation exploited, by a nexus of commissars whose names very often turn up in the later Stalinization of Eastern Europe. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, this book is not just another rebuke to misguided idealism. It shows that Spanish democracy was vital and vivid enough to resist the false friend in Moscow, to continue fighting Hitler's and Mussolini's mercenaries at the same time, and ultimately to outlive both communism and fascism. Some defeats are exemplary as well as moving, and the murder of the Spanish Republic is indubitably preeminent among them.

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Dream Depot

GRAND CENTRAL TERMINAL:

Railroads, Engineering, and Architecture in New York City.

By Kurt C. Schlichting.

Johns Hopkins Univ. Press. 208 pp. \$26.50

GRAND CENTRAL:

Gateway to a Million Lives.

By John Belle and Maxinne R. Leighton. Norton. 192 pp. \$39.95

Reviewed by Tom Lewis

The spring of 1913 in New York saw three important events in America's cultural life. On lower Broadway, merchant prince Frank W. Woolworth opened the world's tallest skyscraper, a 792-foot Gothic masterpiece whose height would not be eclipsed until the completion of the

Chrysler Building in 1930. On seeing the five-and-ten tower, the popular Methodist divine Samuel Parkes Cadman declared it nothing less than St. John's vision of paradise and proclaimed it the "Cathedral of Commerce." In the 69th Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue, the International