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# New Interpretations of the Spanish Civil War

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X O S É - M A N O E L N Ú Ñ E Z

Michel Lefebvre and Rémi Skoutelsky, *Les Brigades Internationales. Images retrouvées* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2003), 192 pp., €45.00 (hb), ISBN 2-02-052390-6.

Helen Graham, *The Spanish Republic at War, 1936-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 472 pp., £13.99 (pb), ISBN 0-521-45932-X.

Javier Rodrigo, *Los campos de concentración franquistas. Entre la historia y la memoria* (Madrid: Siete Mares, 2003), 251 pp., €18.00 (pb), ISBN 84-933012-05.

Michael Seidman, *A ras de suelo. Historia social de la República durante la Guerra Civil* (Madrid: Alianza, 2003), 388 pp., €18.70 (pb), ISBN 84-206-3706-8 (English edition: *Republic of Egos. A Social History of the Spanish Civil War* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 304 pp., \$24.95 (pb), ISBN 0299178641).

The Spanish Civil War is among the most passionate conflicts of the long twentieth century, as one which arouses considerable emotion, in favour of either the Republican or the Francoist side. Its duration – far beyond what had been predicted in July 1936 by the military rebels and most international observers – together with its rapid conversion into an arena of international dispute between two opposing world-views, ‘fascism’ and ‘anti-fascism’, made it of long-standing interest for world public opinion. Moreover, its internationalisation made it appear as the prelude to the Second World War. The survival of the Francoist dictatorship until 1975 contributed to the fact that the first historical analyses of the Spanish Civil War had to be written abroad and by foreign scholars, mostly French and Anglophone.<sup>1</sup> Even now the Spanish conflict continues to be a matter of interest for non-Spanish scholars, who rely on a long-standing tradition of scholarship on the topic.

The interest of Spanish historians in the Civil War has been relatively late, and well into the late 1970s most of the scholarship in Spanish (and other Iberian languages) consisted of translations from French, British and US authors. There existed, of course, apologias written by the victors and their political heirs, and some contributions from military historians, who adopted a narrative style in order to

<sup>1</sup> Of course, it is worth mentioning here the myriad of books, memoirs and eyewitness accounts produced by Spanish exiles, veterans of the International Brigades, writers and journalists who visited Spain during the war years.

reconstruct the history of military operations. However, even after 1975, interest in the Civil War continued to be relatively limited. No doubt a major reason lay in what Paloma Aguilar called ‘the pact of forgetting’, that is, the informal agreement of both post-Francoist reformers and the democratic anti-Francoist opposition since 1975 to ‘forget’ the Civil War, in order to avoid its repetition in post-Francoist Spain.<sup>2</sup> Spanish historians developed their interest in the history of the restored monarchy and of the Second Republic and, later, skipped the Civil War to study the dynamics of politics and society under the Franco Regime. The history of the three wartime years seemed to remain somewhere in a no man’s land. This was well illustrated by the cultural policy while it was in office (1982–96) of the Spanish Socialist Party, whose main aim was to reinforce an ‘optimistic’ interpretation of the Spanish past and to insist on forgetfulness for the sake of political stability, particularly after Spain joined the European Community in 1986. Since the mid-1990s, however, the ‘pact of silence’ seems to have broken down, as the resilient continuities between the victors of 1939 and today’s Spanish conservatives were used by the left as an efficient political weapon.<sup>3</sup>

This raised a new interest, clearly shown among large sectors of the Spanish public, in a Civil War hitherto consigned to oblivion.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, conservative intellectuals continued to insist on the necessity of ‘forgetting’ the Civil War and the dark Francoist period, in order to find agreement on a common past to serve as the basis for a stronger national feeling. This concern derived from their anxiety to reassert a feeling of Spanish patriotism they felt to be more and more necessary in order to confront the enduring challenge of the nationalist periphery. Nevertheless, the persistence of a divided memory of both the Civil War and the Francoist period has manifested itself in an unexpected way among the grandchildren of those who lost in 1939. New accounts revealed previously unknown aspects of the civil conflict and the ferocious repression of the 1940s, such as the existence all over Spain of dozens of common graves filled with Republican sympathisers shot by Francoist killing squads. Spanish public opinion (re)discovered that those repressive phenomena considered as intrinsic to the Nazi or Stalinist dictatorships, were also a feature of the Franco regime.<sup>5</sup>

Public interest in such matters was paralleled by the historiographical approaches adopted by a younger generation of Spanish historians, some in their late twenties. The study of the everyday experience of repression, or the interaction of coercion and consensus building at the local level, have been the object of new studies over the last decade. Contrary to the opinion shared by some authors that Spanish historiography

<sup>2</sup> Paloma Aguilar, *Memory and Amnesia. The Role of the Spanish Civil War in the Transition to Democracy* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> See Carsten Humlebaek, ‘Rethinking Spain: Continuities and Ruptures in National Discourse after Franco’, Ph.D. thesis, European University Institute, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> According to sociological surveys, the percentage of Spaniards who ‘had not forgotten’ the Civil War rose slightly from 48 per cent in 1995 to 51 per cent in 2000. Enrique Moradiellos, ‘Ni gesta heroica, ni locura trágica: nuevas perspectivas históricas sobre la guerra civil’, *Ayer*, 50 (2003), 11–39.

<sup>5</sup> See Emilio Silva and Santiago Macías, *Las fosas de Franco: Los republicanos que el dictador dejó en las ametas* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2003).

on the Civil War has not yet achieved sufficient maturity to undertake a more dispassionate analysis of the conflict and its consequences, this review article suggests that current Spanish historiography has come of age, as far as the variety of its interpretations and the breadth of topics are concerned.<sup>6</sup> This may be seen in the fact that a forthcoming collection of essays on the Spanish conflict and its historical interpretations features as many Spanish as British and US contributors.<sup>7</sup>

The recent opening of material in the army archives, partially closed to researchers just a decade ago, has allowed historians to develop new angles, as well as to cover new topics and to unveil dark aspects of the civil conflict. Nevertheless, the political emphasis of 'new' conservatism in Spain on forgetting has been accompanied by a so far unsuccessful attempt to launch a kind of Spanish *Historikerstreit*, aimed among other things at revising the history of the Civil War. Few professional historians have taken part in this, and undoubtedly the major role has been taken by some second-rank polemicists who claim to be historians as well. The most striking example so far has been the genuine publishing success of several books written by a former revolutionary communist in the early 1970s.<sup>8</sup> This literature insists that the revolutionary left, the Republicans and substate nationalists alike shared responsibility for the outbreak of the Civil War. It also suggests that in the final run-up to the war the Republicans and left-wing parties were the ones to provoke the conflict by forcing the right to 'counteract' communist and separatist threats with a preventive coup. This kind of 'revisionism' coheres with the drive towards the reinterpretation of the recent Spanish past which has been undertaken by conservative intellectuals and policy-makers since the end of the 1990s. Their main motivation is not to offer historiographically 'fresh' perspectives on the history of the Civil War, but to support the search of the present-day Spanish right for political legitimacy.<sup>9</sup> Current revisionist literature consists mostly of a package of arguments circulated by pro-Francoist historians since the late 1930s, with little methodological care and no original arguments.<sup>10</sup> However, it has experienced an unexpected success among broad sectors of conservative public opinion. The emergence of this new revisionism has contributed strongly to renewed public discussion of the origins and consequences of the Civil War, particularly since 2002.

<sup>6</sup> For the first opinion see Stanley Payne, 'Mitos y tópicos de la Guerra Civil', *Revista de Libros*, 79–80 (2003), 3–5; for the second point of view see Santos Juliá, 'Últimas noticias de la guerra civil', *Revista de Libros*, 81 (2003), 6–8.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Ealham and Michael Richards, eds., *The Splintering of Spain: New Historical Perspectives on the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> Pío Moa, *El derrumbe de la Segunda República y la Guerra Civil* (Madrid: Encuentro, 2001); *idem*, *Los mitos de la guerra civil* (Madrid: La Esfera de los Libros, 2002); and *idem*, *Contra la mentira: Guerra Civil, izquierda, nacionalistas y jacobinismo* (Madrid: LibrosLibres, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> See Xosé-Manoel Núñez, 'From National-Catholic Nostalgia to Constitutional Patriotism: Conservative Spanish nationalism since the Early 1990s', in Sebastian Balfour, ed., *The Politics of Contemporary Spain* (London: Routledge, 2004, forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> Enrique Moradiellos, 'La intervención extranjera en la guerra civil: un ejercicio de crítica historiográfica', *Ayer*, 50 (2003), 199–232.

### The varieties of repression

Javier Rodrigo's monograph represents quite accurately the methods and ambitions of the new Spanish historiography on the Civil War. This extremely young historian offers in his study in advance of what will constitute his Ph.D. thesis at the European University Institute. His attempt to explore the nature and functions of the Francoist *univers concentrationnaire* adopts a careful comparative perspective to explore what may be termed the consequences of modern warfare in the long twentieth century, particularly the state's need to set up new and wider-ranging instruments of repression, as the social groups to be repressed became larger. This was a consequence of the new mass society which had emerged from the end of the nineteenth century and manifested itself in a variety of ways in civil wars, as the author convincingly depicts (pp. 23–32). Rodrigo views the Francoist concentration camps as an integral part of the rebels' war aims, if not of those of Franco himself. The war had as its final aim the eradication of the sources of social unrest, revolutionary behaviour and disorder in Spanish society. Thus the new National-Catholic state did not aim at incorporating the masses (both the working class and the peasantry) into a mass movement on behalf of a 'national revolution', as was the case with Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany. On the contrary, its main objective was to purge the national body and to erase 'anti-Spain' by means of mass repression and the re-education of all those who had served, willingly or not, in the Republican army, as well as of political opponents. This affected an approximate figure of more than half a million Spaniards between July 1936 and April 1939 (p. 221).

Mass repression was to become a kind of 'foundation myth' for Francoism. This reflected the nature of early Francoism, as Rodrigo consistently shows, although a great part of his study is devoted to a careful reconstruction of the functioning of the whole system. Thus he pays considerable attention to the institutional and political dynamics which determined the implementation of the network of concentration camps, as well as its evolution from an initial phase of improvised 'preventive internment' to the centralisation and regulation of the system (from July 1937 on) and its final suppression. In particular, the author examines at length the task of the so-called 'classifying committees' which determined in every province who was to be subject to military trial, or who was 'close' to the Francoist cause. A total of 106,822 war prisoners passed before these committees in 1937 alone, and 11 per cent were eventually classified as opponents of the regime. A large number were forced to join the Francoist army for a long period, in order to 'purge' the years spent under the Republican flag. Likewise, forced labour was deployed to carry out public works, build infrastructure and 'reconstruct' the Spanish economy. This took place with the co-operation of private enterprises and local authorities, which regularly demanded supplies of slave labour for their factories and services (pp. 139–40).

This is one of the most interesting findings of this book, together with the accurate combination of two perspectives, from 'above' and from the bottom up. His outlook from 'above' permits the author to describe and analyse the institutional dynamics of the system of forced labour. In contrast, his careful use of the perspective 'from below',

by using memoirs written by former prisoners, as well as interviews, allows him to pay attention to the everyday experience of the prisoners.<sup>11</sup> The author also addresses, in his last and probably most suggestive, though excessively brief, chapter (pp. 153–87), the memory of concentration camps in post-Franco Spain. The memory of the repression is a growing historiographical concern for present-day Spanish historians. Rodrigo may be good proof of this.

### **The view from abroad: images, politics and mobilisation**

The other books covered in this article display the remarkable continuing interest shown by foreign authors in the Spanish conflict. They also demonstrate the increasing diversity of this academic literature, and offer an opportunity to combine the dialectics of ‘classical’ interpretations with new, thought-provoking theses.

Lefebvre and Skoutelsky offer a well-edited catalogue to the exhibition on the International Brigades which was seen first in France and then in Spain during 2003. They shed new light on the International Brigaders’ experiences and everyday life thanks to the discovery of a set of new photo archives, some from recently opened Russian archives, others from personal papers and materials from all over Europe (this material includes, for example, the photo archive of the political commander of the International Brigades, the hardline French communist André Marty). Apart from unpublished pictures from well-known war correspondents and photographers (such as Robert Capa, Turai or John Heartfield), the volume also includes reproductions of booklets, propaganda pamphlets, memoirs and posters in support of the Republic produced in several languages. The astonishing variety of pictures includes the most familiar images from the mass media and history books, such as the departures of enthusiastic volunteers and their arrival in Spain (pp. 20–43), and reflects the impressive repertory of innovative propaganda techniques put at the service of the Republican cause, from the organisation of solidarity rallies all over the world – including the deployment of propaganda campaigns by the Soviet Union – to the launching of photomontage as a war weapon. The use of propaganda techniques, already deployed during the First World War, matured during the Spanish Civil War. Both in Spain and abroad, the images of the Spanish conflict nevertheless relied on a long tradition of stereotyped discourses about Spanish ‘peculiarity’ and exoticism,<sup>12</sup> and that aspect is not dealt with in a critical way by the authors of this volume. The book also documents everyday life at the front (pp. 94–129) and in the trenches, particularly in the besieged city of Madrid (to which an entire chapter is devoted, pp. 44–67). Of particular interest, however, are the images showing life in

<sup>11</sup> This approach is being developed through the publication of prisoners’ memoirs and diaries. See, e.g., Victor M. Santidrián Arias, ed., *Diario del soldado republicano Casimiro Jabonero. Campo de prisioneros de Lavacolla, prisión de Santiago de Compostela 1939–1940* (Santiago de Compostela: Fundación 10 de Marzo, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Enric Ucelay-Da Cal, ‘La imagen internacional de España en el período de entreguerras: reminiscencias, estereotipos, dramatización neorromántica y sus consecuencias historiográficas’, *Spagna Contemporanea*, 15 (1999), 23–52.

the rearguard (pp. 130–63) and the interaction of the foreign volunteers with the Spanish population.

Lefebvre and Skoutelsky's is good proof of how photography constitutes a part of historical experience, and in turn becomes a useful source for uncovering those aspects of war and mobilisation often hidden by the amount of printed discourse which forms the historian's usual sources. Despite this, a more detailed treatment of the theoretical issues involved in the use of such sources would have been desirable. It becomes difficult, for example, to grasp the difference between propagandist and private uses of pictures in the book, partly because of the empathy that the authors feel towards their subject. Similarly, the reader misses a more critically oriented treatment of the historical relevance and meaning of the foreign intervention in the Spanish Civil War. This kind of book, despite its attractions and qualities, is in danger of simply reproducing the images and narratives that were constructed and spread during the conflict by both sides, instead of targeting them as an object for critical analysis.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to the increasing attention that Francoist politics during the war years have received in recent Spanish historiography,<sup>14</sup> Helen Graham's study constitutes a comprehensive analysis and detailed description of Republican politics during the war period. She attempts to offer a consistent overview of the strategies and tensions pursued by the main actors on the Republican side until the final defeat.

In this respect, Graham focuses on the way in which different political parties and trade unions carried on the war effort, as well as on the difficulties faced by Republican governments in resolving the basic question at stake for the different supporters of the Republic: what was more important, to win the war (Republican government), to make the revolution (revolutionary organisations, particularly trade unions and anarchist-dominated local and regional councils) or to achieve a higher degree of regional self-government (Basque and Catalan nationalist governments)? Graham uses a huge amount of printed sources and newly released documents from Spanish and British archives in her exploration of the interplay of these different actors. Her approach mostly takes the form of a classical political history narrative, far from any cultural(ist) perspective. But Graham demonstrates how her approach, far from being outmoded, continues to be useful to the understanding of the crucial question: why did the Republic lose? Her fluid account can be regarded as a step forward in the tradition of good narrative writing on modern Spanish history inaugurated by Hugh Thomas, Gabriel Jackson and Paul Preston, and in some ways her book may well be considered as a kind of updated synthesis, which will be extremely useful for anyone interested in the Civil War.

However, Graham's study goes far beyond this. First, she successfully covers the political and social dimensions of the Republican mobilisation, and clearly retraces

<sup>13</sup> A good example is the huge collection of political posters of the Civil War edited by Jordi Carulla and Arnau Carulla, *La Guerra Civil en 2000 carteles*, 2 vols. (Barcelona: Postermil, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> See an updated synthesis in Ismael Saz, 'Política en zona nacionalista: la configuración de un régimen', *Ayer*, 50 (2003), 55–83.

the interaction of both. Second, apart from incorporating much recent Spanish and international research on the Civil War, her interpretation of some events, such as the Barcelona May Days of 1937 or the presidency of the socialist Juan Negrín – often accused of being a slave of Moscovite Stalinism – is undoubtedly innovative. The main challenge faced by Republican governments built on a coalition of socialist and middle-class Republican reformers, sustained by communists and, more reluctantly, by peripheral nationalists, was ‘how to instil war consciousness and, linked to that, an idea of the “necessary state” in the differing social constituencies’ (p. 129) which made up the social base of the Republic. This social base was regionally and socially fragmented, so that the Republican government’s attempt to legitimise the state always faced both social and territorial challenges. But no less important was the internal division of the ruling Socialists between a more ‘revolutionary’ faction, largely represented by the socialist trade-union and a more moderate one, while the Communists opted for decisive commitment to the war effort as their first and foremost priority, postponing the achievement of revolutionary goals. This was not the case with anarcho-syndicalists and dissident communists of the POUM (Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification). The Republic, according to Graham, never resolved this basic contradiction.

These political disputes were just a part of the issue, which has been thoroughly analysed by several historians. In a wider sense, they represented the real failure of the Republic to build a war effort based on large-scale social mobilisation. Only the Negrín government, set up in May 1937, came close to the objective of re-legitimising the state’s authority. But it did so at the cost of alienating most Catalan nationalists – fearful of the reinforcement of centralist authority – as well as the anarcho-syndicalists and other sectors of the left after the ‘May events’ of 1937, when anarchist and POUM militias clashed with troops loyal to the Republican government in Barcelona and other towns. Graham sees in the events of May 1937 not a simple consequence of Stalin’s instructions to the Spanish Republicans – the thesis of the ‘Stalinist plot’ which supposedly culminated in the killing of POUM’s leader Andreu Nin – but a more complicated political game in response to fractures within the Republican home front which dated from at least the beginning of the war (p. 296). When the political elites of the Republic came to realise that it was necessary to win what Graham calls the ‘home front’, it was too late: isolated in Europe, the Republic lacked the financial resources to build ‘a social contract with those fighting and dying for it’, since material shortages and military defeats made it impossible for the Republic to enact ‘a wide mobilisation in the name of a social order that did not yet exist’ (p. 388).

Michael Seidman’s book attempts to answer the same question from a very different angle. He aims to give a substantially different insight on the social dynamics of the war fronts during the conflict, by focusing on what used to be neglected in most historical analyses of the Spanish Civil War: the experience and motivations of individual combatants and ordinary people. War experience and the way in which individuals passively and actively became involved in the war effort behind the spheres of political and military decision-making constitute the object of his study. This

coincides with the recent renewal of military history, characterised by the attempt to overcome the history of war as a dense description of military operations and political decisions by applying the methods of social and cultural history to the analysis of the combatants' experience.<sup>15</sup> The nature of Seidman's approach is clearly explained in the introduction: only the individual counts, so that, in his view, individual agency clearly prevails over structure (pp. 15–29). By looking at the experience of individual soldiers and ordinary people at the rear, particularly in the Republican zone, Seidman attempts to elucidate whether the conflict was a confrontation between 'idealists', or whether it was just a clash between masses of conscripted peasants and workers with little interest in politics and less enthusiasm, thrown into action by minorities of politically motivated 'activists'.

After four excessively long chapters devoted to 'militancy', 'opportunism', 'cynicism' and 'survival', Seidman's conclusion is expressed in a clear-cut way: opportunists and egotistical individualists made up the majority of the soldiers and mobilised population in both camps, particularly the loyalist one. Thus, what he much too simply identifies as a 'left-wing history' focused on the agency of social classes and collective actors, must be questioned. According to him, the war should no longer be regarded as an epic conflict between reactionary elites and revolutionary people. But the author seems to fight against a historiographic ghost: no serious historian takes such a narrow view any more. Indeed, recent historical research has painstakingly analysed the inter-class support for the rebels of July 1936.<sup>16</sup> As war went on and the prospects of victory for the Republic faded, the common people still living in the Republican territory moved from opportunism to cynicism and thereafter exclusively to the search for survival in the last months of the war (pp. 27–8). Moreover, the unresolved tensions between food suppliers (the peasantry) and supplied (urban workers and soldiers) persisted in the Republican zone, becoming an unsurmountable obstacle to the efficient organisation of the Republican government's war effort. While workers often refused to do extra for the cause, the peasants tried to hide their harvests and to sell them on the black market. This would not make the Spanish conflict any different from other civil conflicts, such as the American or Russian civil wars. However, no comparison is made with other civil wars of the first half of the twentieth century, such as the Greek civil war, often considered a kind of mirror of the Spanish case. The absence of references to the well-established cultural and social approaches to the history of the First and Second World Wars, which are particularly developed in European historiography, is no less striking.

Seidman's knowledge of military sources is near-exhaustive, though this is not true of eyewitness accounts and war memoirs. However, the massive amount of information supplied in his book often leads to redundancy, and sometimes the main arguments get lost amidst excessive description. Moreover, the overabundance

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Kühne and Benjamin Ziemann, eds., *Was ist Militärgeschichte?* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Javier Ugarte, *La nueva Covadonga insurgente. Orígenes sociales y culturales de la sublevación de 1936 en Navarra y el País Vasco* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 1998).

of examples of individual 'egoistic' agency does not allay the doubt about how representative they are, since there is no methodological discussion about the real value and reliability of those sources. This is a fundamental debate which has arisen quite recently in French historiography concerning soldiers' experience in the First World War. Are soldiers' memoirs and eyewitness accounts sufficiently reliable as to be able to infer from them whether the *poilus* consented to go to the trenches and to adopt a 'war culture' or were *forced* to do so? As has been accurately pointed out, the frontiers between 'motivation' or 'consent' and 'coercion' are diffuse and changing.<sup>17</sup>

The author successfully undertakes a detailed reconstruction of the harsh living conditions and the problems of military organisation. He manages too to draw a complete picture of the relationship between political elites, the military command and rank-and-file soldiers.<sup>18</sup> Seidman reminds us that the Spanish war also was a conflict characterised by long periods of inactivity and 'quiet fronts'. Furthermore, in his view the Republican army was not only a 'people's army' packed with idealistic militiamen and workers and peasants mobilised in defence of their class interests, but rather a conglomerate of opportunists and individualists led by a minority of idealists. In practice only a few military units, in particular the highly motivated volunteers of the International Brigades, displayed a higher morale.

Seidman's approach, as well as his conclusions, are certainly thought-provoking and may substantially nuance the prevailing view of the Spanish conflict. But they also raise several problems. The first relates to a typical social scientist's dilemma when facing the intersection of agency and structure. Which was more important? To find the right balance becomes as difficult as to infer it from the documents. The nature of their sources may mislead historians into literal interpretation, and military sources often exaggerate individualism and minimise idealism: they usually deal with finding out and solving organisation problems. Similarly, to affirm that the number of 'activists' was a tiny minority without providing any figures for party and trade-union membership at all is problematic. One cannot forget the deep social roots of revolutionary trade-unionism among the Asturian coalminers or the bricklayers of Madrid, for instance. The transformation of political militancy into fighting spirit is certainly not a one-way process. Moreover, the long duration of the war, the high levels of violence in the rearguard, as well as the intensity of some crucial battles might not be fully explained by Seidman's approach. Desertion in the Republican army, for instance, appears to have been comparatively limited.

Second, though the book deals with reconstructing individual agency, it is extraordinary to note that the way in which individuals experienced the conflict, as a set of interpretations and perceptions, gets lost amidst the huge flow of information provided. The relatively scant use of memoirs or private correspondence (such as

<sup>17</sup> For a recent reflection on these issues, see Antoine Prost, 'La guerre de 1914 n'est pas perdue', *Le Mouvement Social*, 199 (2002), 95–102, where the author discusses Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14–18, retrouver la guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000) (also reviewed in this issue).

<sup>18</sup> Some of these aspects have already been highlighted, using oral sources, by Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain. The Experience of Civil War, 1936–39*, 3rd edn (London: Penguin, 1988).

soldiers' letters) prevents the author from getting closer to the soldier and militiaman's own values and sentiments. This is precisely one of the fields in which recent military history is achieving its most innovating results.<sup>19</sup>

Third, Seidman relies too often on problematic sources of a subjective nature, such as war memoirs and operational histories written by Francoist officers. Their judgements on the Republican combatants are obviously far from balanced. It is surprising that these sources are used to a considerable extent to evaluate the fighting morale of the Republicans. Moreover, the author uses terms such as 'heroism' and 'bravery' to explain combat performance, even though such variables are not usually taken at face value by modern military historians. On the contrary, efficient organisation and training, deep motivation and appropriate command are considered as the rational causes of adequate combat performance.<sup>20</sup> All this, added to the presence of professional shock troops, such as Moroccan mercenaries and Legionaries – whose importance for the way in which the rebels conducted the war effort should not be overlooked<sup>21</sup> – as well as better equipment and supplies favoured by privileged foreign intervention, remain the main factors explaining the military successes of the Francoist army. This is already accepted in the historiography, and Seidman's book does not substantially alter this view.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, Seidman does not examine whether political indoctrination of the Republican (and Nationalist) soldiers might have been fostered by the common participation of individuals in a joint fight against the other. As research on social movements has consistently shown, the forging of collective identities and, therefore, of political identities must not be regarded merely as a factor encouraging collective action, but also as a result of it. The experience of war in the trenches, common suffering and confronting the enemy, comradeship and political indoctrination, may have well played an important role in turning individualistic peasants and workers into 'activists', as many war memoirs and accounts reveal.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps a more subtle analysis, going beyond the impressive amount of erudition displayed by the author, could have elucidated whether those who fought in the trenches really knew anything about what was at stake in the war. As historical research has largely shown, soldiers' motivation is a complex phenomenon, a mixture of passive acceptance of sacrifice, fear of repression, brutalisation and ideological push.

<sup>19</sup> Soldiers' letters have hardly been used in the study of the Spanish Civil War, partly due to the lack of archive materials. However, some recent editions of war letters suggest their enormous potential: see Manuel de Ramón and Carmen Ortiz, *Madrina de guerra. Cartas desde el frente* (Madrid: La Esfera de los Libros, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., the analysis of the Red Army's performance in the Second World War by Richard Overy, *Russia's War. A History of the Soviet War Effort: 1941–1945* (London: Penguin, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace. Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> A good example would be the way in which the Galician Communists transformed apolitical seasonal labourers who had stayed around Madrid in the summer of 1936 because they could not get back home into active supporters of the Republican cause, after having enlisted them. See Víctor Santidrián Arias, *Historia do PCE en Galicia, 1920–1968* (Sada: Edicións do Castro, 2002).

To find the balance among all variables remains the great challenge historians have to face.<sup>23</sup>

Prewar political socialisation was important, but wartime political socialisation also became decisive for turning politically passive individuals in 1936 into convinced supporters of the Republic in 1939 and then into exiles in French camps. Conversely, many 'apolitical' peasants became fully convinced anti-communists after being enlisted in the Francoist Army, to the point that they volunteered against 'Bolshevism' in the summer of 1941, as the Blue Division was dispatched to the Russian front.<sup>24</sup> This is probably one of the reasons why the Spanish Civil War was so important in terms of social experience and mass mobilisation, in spite of having left relatively less bloodshed in the trenches than other conflicts whose place in the European collective memory has been less enduring. As Rodrigo shows, the victors knew this far too well. Hence the necessity of 're-educating' the mass of prisoners. However, according to Seidman, one could conclude that the winners were not aware that they were repressing politically inoffensive individualists. This would undoubtedly be a historical paradox: did the Francoist repression turn 'individualists' into fully fledged opponents of the New State?

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Mario Isnenghi and Giorgio Rochat, *La Grande Guerra 1914–1918* (Florence/Milan: La Nuova Italia, 2000), pp. 539–42.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Eduardo Sánchez Salcedo, *Framan (de Serrablo a Leningrado)* (Sabiñánigo: Ayuntamiento de Sabiñánigo/Instituto de Estudios Altoaragoneses/Museo Ángel Orensanz, 2002).