

London Review of Books

Into the Net

Neal Ascherson

Spain in Our Hearts: Americans in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39 by [Adam Hochschild](#)
Macmillan, 438 pp, £25.00, April 2016, ISBN 978 1 5098 1054 3

iNo Pasarán! Writings from the Spanish Civil War edited by [Pete Ayrton](#)
Serpent's Tail, 393 pp, £20.00, April 2016, ISBN 978 1 84668 997 0

The Last Days of the Spanish Republic by [Paul Preston](#)
William Collins, 390 pp, £25.00, February 2016, ISBN 978 0 00 816340 2

A Distant Heartbeat: A War, a Disappearance and a Family's Secrets by [Eunice Lipton](#)
New Mexico, 165 pp, £18.50, April 2016, ISBN 978 0 8263 5658 1

Eighty years have gone by. But there's still no agreement on how the Spanish Civil War should be remembered. Nor should there be. The real tribute to the force of that human firestorm is the contest of judgments and feelings which still smoulders and still causes pain.

Where should the focus be? For many, simply on the stories: the recounting of sacrificial courage and suffering. For others, on the war's presentation as history, with a dangling fringe of what ifs. Or on its 'lessons', learned in one way by Hitler and Mussolini, in a second way by the surviving defenders of the Republic, in a third manner by Stalin. If there was an English translation of the lessons, no democratic leader – certainly neither Churchill nor Roosevelt – bothered to read it. What remains is the bleak lesson drawn by Camus. 'It was there that [my generation] learned that one can be right and yet be beaten, that force can vanquish spirit ...'

Or the Spanish War can be remembered for its epiphanies. What happened in and around Barcelona in the first years of the war did not last, did not happen in most of Spain, ended in tragedy and a viciously disputed memory and made little difference to the war's outcome. Adam Hochschild, in *Spain in Our Hearts*, suggests that the foreign journalists covering the war were so obsessed with the military struggle and the Republican leadership in Madrid that they hardly noticed the revolution going on outside their hotels. And yet Barcelona in those years, rather than what was done on the battlefields, was a brief revelation of something latent but dazzling in humanity: the hope to fly like angels.

It was one of those moments only Europe seems to do. The granite mountains of government and wealth, the ravines of class and the dark forests of the law, suddenly turn out to be cardboard stage scenery. Ordinary people kick them down and fall into one another's arms. Everything is to be held and done in common; nobody is to be unwillingly obeyed; in the

sunlight of what Robert Burns called 'social love', human beings return to their true nature of unselfish sharing. It's a transfiguration first seen in the French Revolution; most recently (in flashes) during the 1968 'events' of Berlin and the Paris May. We, or our children, will see it again.

In Barcelona and Catalonia, this epiphany was released (they wouldn't have liked the word 'led') by anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists. Orwell arrived there in December 1936 to 'fight fascism' and walked about the streets in a daze, trying to adjust to a place where waiters and shop assistants spoke to him as an equal and where he was denounced for trying to give a lift-boy a tip. He wrote, with touching Englishness: 'All this was queer and moving. There was much in it that I did not understand, in some way I did not even like it, but I recognised it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for.'

Others recognised it as a state of affairs worth fighting against, and they were not only on the rebel side with Franco. Most of the political coalition defending the Republic – liberals, many socialists and above all the huge and well-organised Spanish Communist Party – feared that the anarchist eruption in Catalonia would weaken the war effort and frighten off the 'bourgeois democracies' which might be persuaded to arm and aid the Republican cause. Hochschild records the chilling words of a communist woman in Barcelona to an American visitor: 'There is no revolution ... This is a people's war against fascism.'

Hochschild's book – intelligent, luminously well written and researched – is constructed around the experiences of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Some 2800 American volunteers fought or served as medics and nurses with the International Brigades, and 750 of them were killed. Hochschild says that his book doesn't pretend to be 'a full history of the war, or even of American involvement in it. It is, rather, the story of a collection of people whose paths took them an ocean away from home during a violent time.' But this is too modest. His account – rather than history – of the war reaches far beyond the American fighters to recover its impact, month by month, on foreign visitors and journalists and on their governments.

This is very much a post-Cold War book, which can afford to take a calm view of the world communist movement and of the Communist Party of the United States in the Stalinist years. 'Most of the Americans who went to Spain considered themselves communists, and we cannot understand them without understanding why communism then had such a powerful appeal and why the Soviet Union seemed a beacon of hope to so many.' About three-quarters of the American volunteers were party members. Ninety of them were black. A third of them came from the New York area and a great many were Jewish. The 'prototype' volunteer, according to Hochschild, was 'a New Yorker, a communist, an immigrant or the son of immigrants, a trade unionist and a member of a group that has almost vanished from the United States today: working-class Jews'. As Hochschild says, none of them had the social and intellectual distinction of some famous Brigadiers from elsewhere: Julian Bell, John Cornford or André Malraux. But their motives for fighting were large – larger than Spain. As one old volunteer told Hochschild, 'For us it wasn't Franco ... it was always Hitler.' Before the populations of the democracies woke up to what was at stake, these few had understood and named the beast

now slouching towards them. When the survivors returned, envious or guilty voices dismissed them as 'premature anti-fascists'.

The stalwart figure of Robert Merriman marches through Hochschild's story. Big, stubborn and calm, he was a natural leader to whom everyone turned in times of horror and confusion, and a militant whose faith in the Soviet Union never wavered. And he had lived there. A working-class graduate from Berkeley, Bob moved with his wife, Marion, to Moscow in the 1930s, at a time when thousands of young Americans accepted the USSR's invitation to find jobs in its colossal industrialisation drive. Ominous rumours – the Ukrainian famine, for instance – went round the American expat community, but Bob loyally ignored them.

It wasn't the Great Purge or the Moscow trials that made Bob Merriman leave the Soviet Union, but the outbreak of war in Spain and the Comintern's call for volunteers. There he was to lead the Lincoln men in combat: wounded in the Jarama battles in 1937, rallying his men as the Ebro front collapsed in March 1938, missing – presumed killed – as he crossed the Ebro again to rescue American soldiers trapped by the fascist offensive. Hochschild is sure that Merriman was a model for 'Jordan', hero and martyr of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

Through the memoirs and letters of other American and British survivors, Hochschild recalls the dogged courage of the International Brigades, flung into ill-fated offensives and counter-offensives at Brunete or Teruel, Belchite or the Ebro, equipped at first with museum-worthy Russian rifles or pre-1914 French *mitrailleuses* which jammed. The Republic was initially far richer than the rebels, but the only power willing to sell them arms was the Soviet Union. The democracies stood back. 'If there is somewhere where fascist and Bolsheviks can kill each other off, so much the better,' Stanley Baldwin observed. Roosevelt called for 'a moral embargo' on selling weapons to either side. But as the Third Reich and Mussolini's Italy continued to pour men, tanks and aircraft into Franco's camp, 'non-intervention' became a slow death sentence on the Republic.

This was obvious to the foreign journalists covering the war from Madrid. With unexpected anger, Hochschild protests that 'not one [journalist] showed much interest in the revolution that for months surrounded them.' But he knows how a travelling press corps operates, and shows empathy with the talented mob working out of the Hotel Florida in Madrid during the siege. Hemingway and Martha Gellhorn and Herbert Matthews of the *New York Times* and Virginia Cowles were among that crew, most of them hotly committed to the anti-fascist cause. Gellhorn, with mounting desperation, used her friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt to warn of the consequences of non-intervention and plead for American help. Hemingway, braggart though he was, put enormous energy and initiative into organising the escape of soldiers and civilians as the Republic foundered. Matthews fought the Catholic editors of the *New York Times* who kept changing his stories to favour Franco's propaganda, and yet lost contact with reality as he wrote crazily upbeat articles about the Republic's 'excellent' morale as Franco prepared his final breakthrough.

In Barcelona, the young Americans living in the ecstasy of an anarchist 'new world' were appalled when the communists and their government allies struck to restore an older kind of order. Hochschild tells this wretched story carefully and pretty fairly. He doesn't buy the

argument that the war was lost because the revolution was suppressed, reluctantly concluding that one element of the communist case was valid: to win that sort of war, 'a disciplined army responsible to a central command is far more effective.' Years earlier, Orwell had come round to the same opinion: the belief that 'the war could have been won if the revolution had not been sabotaged was probably false,' he wrote. But both writers – Orwell especially, who only just got away with his life from the Barcelona purge – find the communist putsch detestable in its brutality, mendacity and servility to instructions from Moscow. Hochschild mourns what was lost: 'doomed though the Spanish Revolution may have been, for a matter of months a stunningly different kind of society grew and flourished in a way it never has since.'

The British volunteers defending Madrid University found that a book had to be 350 pages long to stop a bullet. They barricaded themselves behind Kant, Voltaire, Goethe and Pascal. John Cornford and his comrades would have been equally safe behind Hochschild's *Spain in Our Hearts*, which is long enough to feature scores of American and British fighters. These volunteers were both men and women, and Republican Spain was the first place on earth where an African-American woman – Salaria Kea – headed a team of white nurses. It was also the first place where a black officer – Oliver Law – commanded an integrated American brigade in battle.

Hochschild returns again and again to American non-intervention – the policy Roosevelt himself afterwards called 'a grave mistake'. Roosevelt had instinctive sympathy for the Republican cause, understood as the working people of Spain defending themselves against fascism. But his inclinations were clouded by devious political calculations, in particular the effect that 'arms for Spain' might have on the Catholic vote in the United States. And Hochschild makes clear the massive and possibly decisive support of some American business leaders for Franco. 'Without American petroleum and American trucks and American credits, we could never have won the civil war,' a Franquist diplomat observed years later. The petroleum was supplied by Texaco and its gravelly-voiced boss Torkild Rieber all through the conflict. Rieber went on to refunction Texaco's global port presence into a fascist intelligence network, warning Franco's staff of oil-tanker movements destined for the Republic so that the ships could be hunted down and sunk by Italian submarines. Roosevelt had a good idea of what Rieber was up to, but took no action to stop him. So much for that 'moral embargo'. Rieber went on to ship 325 million dollars' worth of oil (at present prices) to Franco. He became a Knight of the Grand Cross of Isabel la Católica and an enthusiast for Nazi Germany. A pal of Hermann Goering's, he traded busily with the Third Reich until Hitler declared war on the US in 1941. 'Rieber died in 1968, at the age of 86, a wealthy man.'

Hochschild's wide-ranging and imaginative treatment of the Spanish war is the right preparation for *iNo Pasarán!* – an anthology of personal experiences remembered or (lightly) fictionalised. Pete Ayrtton has selected from work by 38 writers, only some of whom are famous and not all of whom were on the side of the Republic. There are translations not only from Spanish but also from Basque, Catalan, French, Italian and Polish. Most contributors are or were on the left, but Drieu la Rochelle – French fascist and collaborator with the Nazi occupation – is given space, and there are terrible accounts of peasant and

anarchist atrocities to set against memories of Franco's much deeper and broader bloodbath. Malraux, Sartre, Jorge Semprun, Laurie Lee, Victor Serge, Luis Buñuel and of course Orwell have their pages, but for a change – almost welcome – Hemingway and Gellhorn are absent. Instead, the American witnesses chosen by Ayrton are John Dos Passos and Muriel Rukeyser.

Ayrton's selections don't only tell of the killing, in battle or – more often – behind the lines, as victors avenged themselves on helpless civilians. Victor Serge and Pierre Herbart evoke devious communist manoeuvres to destroy ideological opponents in the middle of a desperate war of survival. And Jordi Soler, born a quarter-century after the Civil War ended, writes about the camp at Argelès-sur-Mer, part of France's foul Gulag archipelago into which half a million soldiers and refugees from the defeated Republic were herded – Soler's grandfather among them.

The most memorable of these extracts or sketches are about time – the draining of one kind of significance from that war and its replacement by others. For some writers, that past has been completely cut off by what followed, becoming a private place reserved for its survivors. Laurie Lee remembers 'the chance to make one grand, uncomplicated gesture of personal sacrifice and faith which might never occur again. Certainly it was the last time this century that a generation had such an opportunity before the fog of nationalism and mass slaughter closed in.'

Others feel an imperative to keep the tunnel of connection open. Soler gets into his car in Barcelona and in two hours has crossed a now invisible French frontier to reach Argelès, the journey that had taken his grandfather and the mass of Republican fugitives so many agonising weeks. The beach where the detention camp stood is now covered with 'a crowd of tourists who, smothered in cream, expose their bodies to the sun'. And yet Soler says: 'Very little can be done to ward off oblivion, but it is essential we do so, otherwise we will end up without foundations or perspective.'

*

The world has watched, without making much effort to understand, Spain's miserable struggles and disputes over exhumations, monuments, hidden atrocities. In Spain, at least, the Civil War refuses to stay dead. Bernardo Atxaga was living in a Castilian village when, in 1981, mad Colonel Tejero burst into the Parliament with guns and tried to restore the Franco regime. The very same day, the village priest went straight to the military barracks with a list of socialists and liberals to be arrested. That was many years after Brecht wrote: 'The womb from whence That crept/Is fertile yet.' He was thinking of Germany. Is that womb still fertile in Spain, even in the 21st century? Or in the European nations now threatened with authoritarian, racist populism?

The Spanish Civil War began with a coup d'état: Franco's rebellion in Morocco. It's less well known that it ended in another one. This was the putsch – or mutiny – on the Republican side on 5 March 1939, which effectively overthrew the government of Juan Negrín and sought an 'honourable' surrender. The two men heading the coup were Segismundo Casado, commander of the Republic's 'army of the centre', and Julián Besteiro, an elderly and

disaffected socialist who had been the party's president. In the last few weeks, millions of web-users have been putting round Mencken's 1920 prophecy that the White House would one day be 'adorned' by 'a downright fool and a complete narcissistic moron'. This also happens to fit the plotters in 1939 Spain quite neatly. Besteiro was the dreamy idiot. Casado, who pulled him into the conspiracy, was the self-dramatising, self-obsessed moron.

Paul Preston, author of *The Last Days of the Spanish Republic*, hits hard from his first page. 'This is the story of an avoidable humanitarian tragedy that cost many thousands of lives and ruined tens of thousands more.' He explains that the tragedy 'centres on three individuals. One, Dr Juan Negrín, the victim of what might be called a conspiracy of dunces, tried to prevent it. Two bore responsibility for what transpired. One of these, Julián Besteiro, behaved with culpable naivety. The other, Segismundo Casado, behaved with a remarkable combination of cynicism, arrogance and selfishness.'

By early 1939, it was obvious that the Republic was going to lose the war. The Republican offensive on the Ebro had been driven back with terrible slaughter, and the Nationalist drive in Catalonia had broken through in early January 1939. Negrín was well aware of what was taking place. Hochschild, for some reason, dismisses him as 'a portly, multilingual physiologist famous for his gargantuan appetite'; Preston's book shows him to have been a man of desperate courage and energy. He had few illusions, but never ceased to put forward bold schemes which were undermined by disobedient or treacherous underlings, or simply by the democracies' reluctance to challenge fascism.

Negrín's first hope, as defeat loomed, was that the struggle in Spain could be prolonged until the inevitable European war broke out. Then, France and Britain might recognise Republican Spain as their ally in the fight against Hitler and European fascism, and with their support the tide could be turned against Franco. But the Munich settlement in the autumn of 1938, followed by Hitler's unopposed seizure of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, told Negrín that the West was not yet ready to fight. On the contrary, the British in particular were pressing him to surrender. Chamberlain's cabinet was impatient to recognise Franco's government; Halifax, as foreign secretary, had declared that 'the sooner this country got on terms with General Franco and made up lost ground, the better.' Both Britain and France urged Negrín to declare a ceasefire in return for a Franco guarantee of 'no reprisals'.

Negrín knew well that Franco had not the slightest intention of sticking to any such guarantee. But he still felt that there were ways to avoid the worst. 'A negotiated peace, always,' he said. 'Unconditional surrender to let them shoot half a million Spaniards, never!' His strategy now became just to fight on, without any prospect of victory but in the hope of forcing concessions from Franco as the price of a settlement.

Behind him, the Republic and its leadership were falling apart. President Azaña, greenish with fear, had removed himself to France, where much of the Republic's 'northern army' had already found refuge. The core of military resistance was now the Communist Party and its forces; hatred of the communists drove the anarchists and their militias into an unlikely alliance with socialists and conservative army officers to prevent what they imagined would be an imminent seizure of power. Negrín, absurdly, was thought to be a communist puppet in

Moscow's pay. The truth was that the mounting disloyalty and disobedience of his government meant that the Communist Party was the only formation he could rely on to carry on the war.

General Casado, thin, bespectacled, fanatically convinced of his own correctness in everything, had been secretly in touch with the Nationalists for a long time. He was far from the only member of the Republican leadership to have clandestine contact with Franco's Fifth Column in Madrid. (It's a weakness of Preston's book that he never explains the extraordinary fact that Franco's intelligence services were able to maintain an almost public presence in the Republican capital during the war. Who were they, we are left wondering, and how were they organised?) Juan Besteiro, socialist intellectual and professor, was another leading figure whose disappointed ambitions and suspicion of Negrín led him into the Fifth Column's net. Gradually, the outlines of a plot 'to save Spain from communism' began to form. Well aware of what was going on in Madrid, Franco was able to hold back his advance and wait for Casado and Besteiro to do his work for him.

Casado convinced his followers that Franco would understand his high motives and – with Negrín and the communists out of the way – offer the Republic an 'honourable peace'. Did he convince himself? From the outset, he secretly arranged to leave 'reds' – anarchists as well as communists – to the vengeance of the fascists after the surrender and promised the Fifth Column that he would make sure they couldn't escape. He lied abundantly, asserting that Franco had promised him he would show mercy and restraint and that the British had persuaded Franco to pardon all professional officers (both totally untrue). Besteiro developed the fantasy that the war would end in a magnificent final parade and a ceremonial embrace, as a sword of victory was presented to Franco.

When Negrín realised what was brewing, it was too late. The coup detonated on 5 March 1939. Its outcome was ghastly and predictable. Franco had no interest in any negotiated peace; by suppressing the Communist Party and its troops, the plotters had removed the one element which might have made him hold off long enough for the Republic to organise the evacuation of its supporters. The anarchists made splendid speeches about 'Numantine resistance' (fighting to the death) and scorched earth, but did nothing much. The socialist leaders sent out a final message: 'More than anti-fascist, it is necessary to be anti-Bolshevik.' Then they bolted to Algeria, with suitcases crammed with saffron to sell in France. Admiral Buiza, the naval commander supposed to cover the evacuation by sea, sailed off with his ships to Tunisia.

The exodus began, unplanned and frantic. Negrín left for France, Casado on a British destroyer for London, where he worked for many years for the BBC. Besteiro sat chain-smoking in Madrid, waiting for Franco to arrive and treat him with gratitude and chivalry (he was soon worked to death in prison). Hordes of Republicans and their families fled towards the south-eastern coast. Casado had claimed he had ships for ten thousand evacuees. It was his final lie: he had none. A British tramp steamer, loaded to the gunwales with nearly three thousand human beings, was the last vessel to leave Alicante. Then Franco's troops arrived, and the slaughter began.

For historians, far from the passions of those years, the war left fascinating what ifs. Hochschild summarises them well, but none now seems convincing. Could the Republic have won, and would that have changed European history? Yes and no. If the democracies had armed Spain against Franco, he could have been defeated, and yet this would scarcely have deterred Hitler from his programme of aggression. Spain was only a sideshow to him. Would a Republican victory have ended in a communist Spain, a puppet of the Soviet Union? Almost certainly not. It's unthinkable that Spain would ever have become anyone's colony, even if Stalin had wanted it. And Spanish communism would soon have been driven down very un-Soviet paths, if only to survive in its own country.

When the International Brigades marched away through weeping crowds, Dolores Ibárruri ('la Pasionaria') told them that they were history, they were legend: 'We shall not forget you.' When a group of survivors came back to a free Spain almost sixty years later, the crowds wept again and applauded and shouted 'Gracias!' Eunice Lipton was one of those who came back, but representing the dead. Her uncle David was killed on Hill 666, in the Ebro offensive; her book is a memoir about her search for him. He came from just that New York Jewish working-class background which Hochschild mourns. It was a hotly disputatious family, in which Lipton's brash father, Louis, mocked his gentle brother for his political idealism ('Nothing is worth dying for! He threw his life away!') and deliberately hid his Spanish letters from the family. Louis's daughter soon understood that this brutal mask hid grief and guilt, and she set out to penetrate the silence, to seek out old Brigade survivors who served with David, and found him so 'sweet tempered ... He didn't have any sharp edges.' 'Without him and his friends,' Lipton ends, 'people like me would never have poured out into the street against the war in Vietnam, ridden the buses and marched for civil rights, created the women's movement.'

[Vol. 38 No. 24 · 15 December 2016](#) » [Neal Ascherson](#) » [Into the Net](#)
pages 21-25 | 4212 words