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## Review of Serge Alternes and Alec Wainman, *Live Souls*

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**Alternês, Serge & Wainman, Alec. *Live Souls*. Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2015. 303 pp, fully illustrated.**

When the Spanish Civil War began in July 1936, many saw the conflict not as a remote war in a far-away country, but as the latest battlefield in an ongoing struggle between fascism and democracy. As the western powers sat on their hands, thousands became consumed with a burning need to act, to *do something*, in support of the beleaguered Spanish Republic. Famously, some 35 000 of them went as far as volunteering to fight in the International Brigades. Others, however, turned their efforts towards trying to help alleviate the suffering of those caught in the turmoil, either by collecting money for medical supplies or, in the case of more than 200 men and women from Britain and Ireland, by going to Spain to join the Republican medical services. One of these was a young Quaker from Northallerton in Yorkshire, called Alec Wainman. Lacking medical knowledge, but able to speak both Russian and Italian, Wainman volunteered to drive an ambulance in Spain, bluffing the recruiters that he was a qualified driver, fluent in Spanish.

One advantage of being an ambulance driver is that one spends much of their time on the road, seeing things that soldiers, stuck in the trenches, cannot. This enabled Wainman to indulge his passion for photography, capturing thousands images of everyday life behind the Republican lines. Believed lost for many years, Wainman's photographs were recently salvaged from a publisher's office and a selection has now been published as *Live Souls; Citizens and Volunteers of Civil War Spain*.

The main body of the book is taken up by the collection of photographs, but also included is Wainman's own account of his time in Spain (unfortunately the memoir ends prematurely in the spring of 1937, but it has been completed by his son). It's a useful companion to the images, containing a moving account of the Nationalists' shelling of Spanish cities and his eyewitness account of the internecine fighting in Barcelona during May 1937, when Wainman supported the government and was holed up for a night in the PSUC's headquarters on Passeig de Gràcia, as passing Anarchist cars took pot-shots at the building. His conclusion that 'the government's authority had increased enormously as a result of its astute handling of the situation', differs rather from that of Orwell.

Wainman drove an ambulance for two months – dangerous work, for Franco's forces deliberately targeted ambulances and hospitals – until, in late 1936, his command of Spanish and Russian led to him being transferred to work as an interpreter with high ranking Soviet aeronautical engineers. The following year he was appointed to another high profile position, working with Constanca de la Mora in the Republican Press Office until, suffering from hepatitis, he returned to Britain in August 1938.

Wainman's trajectory is unusual for a British volunteer in Spain, as too is his background, even within the generally more middle class medical services. Following graduation with a modern languages degree from Oxford, Wainman had worked in the British Embassy in Moscow from 1934 to 1935. Yet, surprisingly, given the widespread paranoia in the Spanish Republic concerning spies, the politically unaffiliated Quaker seems to have sailed through security checks. Wainman's meteoric rise continued after his time in Spain: during the Second World War he graduated from Sandhurst and became an officer in the Royal

Armoured Corps. In 1943, despite his time in Spain, he was allowed to join British Military Intelligence and subsequently, with the rank of Major, served on the Allied Commission in Austria. Unfortunately, the text offers little in the way of explanation, bar his undeniable aptitude for languages.

However, the main focus of interest in *Live Souls* is, of course, the photographs. As Serge Alternês points out in the text, their unearthing echoes the recent discovery of the Mexican suitcase (also those of Agustí Centelles, ‘the Catalan Capa’, that were recovered just after the death of Franco). Unfortunately, there are a number of unfortunate errors in the captions (and a few too in the text), such as the mistaken identification of John Cornford on p. 75, or the frequent use of the term British Medical Unit, rather than Spanish Medical Aid Committee. However, I understand that there is to be a future edition, in which these mistakes will be rectified.

Like Capa and Centelles, Wainman used a 35mm Leica, allowing him the flexibility of 36 shots before needing to reload. He also believed in the necessity of getting close to his subject and many of his photos are close-up intimate shots of International volunteers and Spanish civilians. Some of the images particularly stand out: the arrival of American volunteers in January 1937 (p. 86), a relaxed Stephen Spender (p. 148), men and women being taught to fire rifles (p. 184) and a beautifully composed photograph taken inside a hospital (p. 153). The latter image effectively makes use of empty space and the filthy conditions of the building are contrasted by the image of the nurse pristinely-dressed in white and bathed in light. Many of the images will be familiar to anyone who has read a book on the British role in Spain, though none have previously been credited to Wainman: for example, Nan Green and Leah Manning (p. 229) taking a tea-break in July 1938, Doctor Reg Saxton vainly trying to save the life of the Welsh volunteer Harry Dobson in the cave hospital in La Bisbal de Falset (pp. 236-9) and smiling soldiers leaving the Benecasim convalescence hospital in the spring of 1937 (p. 141), which forms the cover piece of James Hopkins' 1998 study of the British volunteers, *Into the Heart of the Fire*.

The images don't tell the story of the battles or of the high politics but, overall, the collective body of work sheds light on everyday life during the civil war, normality existing within, or side by side with, the madness and horror of the war. Wainman's images may not carry the authority and power of Capa's or Centelles', nor the compositional skill of Cartier-Bresson's or Taro's, but they do possess an immediacy and their understatedness is, in many ways, their great strength. Rather than carefully constructed artefacts trying to tell a greater story, these are intimate and deeply personal snapshots of existence.

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