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Review of James Matthews, *Reluctant Warriors: Republican Popular Army and Nationalist Army Conscripts in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*

Michael Seidman
seidman@fake.com

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James Matthews. *Reluctant Warriors: Republican Popular Army and Nationalist Army Conscripts in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 244 pp.

Employing an innovative and broad definition of military history, this excellent volume explores the experiences and effectiveness of the nearly two million Spaniards, over ninety percent conscripts, who were under arms during the civil war. Matthews shows how the Nationalists recycled Republican soldiers and concludes that Franco's forces were more successful in managing their draftees than the Republican army. By the end of 1937 the Nationalists had taken 107,000 prisoners and posted 59,000 straight into their army. "The Nationalists' ability to incorporate reluctant, and even hostile, recruits into the armed forces, and ensure the adequate service of the majority, is a vital factor in understanding their ultimate victory over the Republic" (223).

As the latter's position deteriorated, it drafted men younger and older than its enemy, culminating in the conscription of forty-three to forty-five year-olds, and in 1939 the seventeen year-olds of the *Quinta del Biberón*. The Nationalists, who received considerable assistance from the Catholic Church and its baptism lists, drafted only those between eighteen and thirty-three. *Franquistas* acted on the principle that single men proved better soldiers than married ones. As the tide turned in their favor, Nationalists received many more deserters. The latter were discouraged by Republican logistical and military failures and attracted by the hope of joining family members in the Nationalist zone. Their flight reflected the inability of the Popular Army to integrate its members. Even so, fellow soldiers were often reluctant to shoot their fleeing comrades. In June 1937 in Barcelona, many – probably a majority – hid or left the city to resist conscription.

Matthews has thoroughly combed military archives and has uncovered rare correspondence from rank-and-file soldiers. He has also confirmed the Nationalist removal of files on their soldiers' self-mutilation. Republican desperation led even more frequently to self-inflicted wounds. Both sides favored volunteers over conscripts and mixed experienced veterans with new draftees. Soldiers in both camps resented the favoritism shown to party and union militants who could avoid frontline duty – at least during early period of the war – more easily than the great mass of apolitical conscripts.

The conflict was a "pauper's war," which is often forgotten in simplistic comparisons with World Wars I and II. Both armies lacked weapons, ammunition, clothing, and food. Republicans especially suffered from the dearth of the basic necessities. Nationalists joked that emaciated Mahatma Gandhi felt admiration for

Prime Minister Juan Negrín who “has forced millions of Spaniards to fast for the last 28 months” (166). As inflation increased in the Republican zone, their soldiers’ willingness to sacrifice declined. Nationalist soldiers received steady wages and subsidies for their family members. Compared to the enemy, they possessed an abundance of water, soap, and tobacco. They controlled venereal diseases better and operated a more efficient postal service which supplied their men with packages and letters, many of the latter written by the morale-boosting *madrinas de guerra*. Nationalists also made more of an effort to identify their dead and bury them with dignity. In summary, the daily needs of Republican soldiers were often unmet, and they lost faith in the credibility of their institutions. “Mundane needs such as food, shelter, pay, and leave therefore played a more immediate role in capturing and maintaining the troops’ loyalty than the ultimate consequences of the war” (102).

Like all good historians, Matthews destroys myths: The Nationalist army was – like the Republican – a popular army, but was able to mold one-time leftists into effective soldiers and to protect their families in the rear. *Franquistas* even offered hospitalized Republican prisoners a Christmas present (*aguinaldo*) of ten *pesetas*. The famous Communist Fifth Regiment was not as disciplined as usually claimed. Both sides promoted their own types of nationalism and initiated literacy classes, although the Republicans engaged in the latter more systematically. Nationalist soldiers had more confidence in their army’s organization, especially in their officers who were better trained and generally more competent than their Republican counterparts. Necessity forced the Republic to promote officers much more rapidly than Nationalists. Franco preferred to use professionals and volunteers rather than conscripts for difficult offensives. His elite units outperformed even the International Brigades, perhaps the best forces on the Republican side. Republicans employed more coercion than the Nationalists in building their army. Franco’s military “required less dramatic exemplary justice” (151) to maintain order. “In a weak state, violence is more commonly employed against its citizens because the channels through which cooptation and compromise are achieved are less efficient” (65).

Matthews’ method of history from below and his emphasis on the domestic Spanish causes of Nationalist strength and Republican weakness is an important corrective to a mostly traditional historiography which has often seen the outcome of the conflict decided in the capitals of the great powers.

Michael Seidman
University of North Carolina Wilmington