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Review of Francisco J. Leira Castiñeira, *Soldados de Franco: Reclutamiento forzoso, experiencia de guerra y desmovilización militar*

Michael Seidman

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Leira Castiñeira, Francisco J. *Soldados de Franco: Reclutamiento forzoso, experiencia de guerra y desmovilización militar*. Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2020. 347 pp.

For reasons that historiographers have not yet investigated, the social history of the twentieth century has generally been neglected in Spain. Historians of that country, including those of foreign nationalities, have been preoccupied by political and, more recently, cultural history. New generations—including scholars such as James Matthews, Ainhoa Campos Posada, Claudio Hernández Burgos, Verónica Sierra Blas, and Miguel Ángel del Arco Blanco—have begun to close this regrettable omission. One can now add to this non-exhaustive list Francisco Leira whose new book won the 2019 Premio Miguel Artola for the best doctoral dissertation in contemporary history. His study of rank-and-file Gallegan soldiers is well-informed by pioneering European and North American social and cultural military history. The author successfully shows that Nationalist conscripts had diverse social, political, and religious orientations that contrasted with the Franco regime's wartime and postwar projection of them as heroic Falangist patriots. Using a wide range of written and oral sources, Leira demonstrates that even though Nationalists effectively mobilized their populations, they did not transform Franco's fighters into devotees of "their" Caudillo and his regime either during or after the war. "Participar no es adherirse" (203). In fact, many conscripts held their Falangist and other gung-ho comrades in contempt for having started the conflict. A good number of fighters believed the rumor that the Generalísimo was gay, which was hardly a tribute in this period of unquestioned machismo.

Leira points out that the civil war provoked "por la primera vez en España ... el servicio militar obligatorio para todos los hombres considerados útiles" (47). Universal conscription during a "guerra total" caused resistance, which took individual forms of simulating illnesses, self-mutilation, and flight. Deserters often tried to head to the mountains, frequently the refuge of individual or group resistance to authority in many conflicts. Leira's examination of the Nationalists' effective terrorism ("una auténtica limpieza") of both the rear and front is depressingly illuminating (149). Such extensive vigilance and repression forced many men of various political and religious persuasions to join militias or the army to save their skins. Leira deftly explores their individual stories. Although most of the rank-and-file desired a quick end to the war, their small-group cohesion—reinforced by the sharing of care packages from home—discouraged desertions which would have had negative consequences for their fellow combatants and close relatives.

The author reveals that the Nationalist rhetoric in the rear demonized Republicans, but this Manichean approach was not repeated at the front where

franquista propaganda portrayed the enemy as deceived “*hermanos*” (129) whom the Nationalists encouraged to desert to the winning and better fed side. This enticement was not surprising given the front-line practice of “live-and-let-live” in which soldiers of both sides exchanged commodities and news and permitted the enemy to recover their dead and wounded in no man’s land. Yet mutual tolerance did not prevent soldiers in the heat of battle from executing captives whom they considered overly burdensome.

The author’s analysis of Franco’s intelligence services emphasizes the efficiency of their censors and informers. Like almost all successful militaries, to motivate their soldiers the Nationalists used a mixture of incentives and punishments. Among the former were leave for reliable fighters, literacy lessons by military chaplains, and a pen-pal program (*madrinas de guerra*) in which the men corresponded with Falangist *señoritas* in the rear. Among the disincentives were long days and even years of exhausting forced labor for the undisciplined and immediate execution for deserters.

Leira is aware of the differences among the various European fascisms; however, like many historians who liken the Spanish Civil War to World War II, he sometimes ignores changing context during this era of what he calls “la guerra civil europea” (64, 93, 124). The concept of a “guerra civil europea” between “dos grandes cosmovisiones sociopolíticas: el fascismo y el antifascismo” often obscures important differences in national policy and chronology. The Spanish Civil War cannot be fully understood without much qualification as “un capítulo más de la ‘guerra civil europea’” or a prelude to the world war (139). Western democratic leaders were neutral during the Spanish Civil War, and the counterrevolutionary antifascism of Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle had little in common with the revolutionary antifascism of Joseph Stalin beyond the shared desire to defeat the Axis. Thus, conservative democratic leaders usually did not support the Spanish Republic. Their antifascist alliance with the Soviet Union (1941-45) collapsed with the defeat of the fascist powers and sparked the onset of the Cold War.

The author compares the recycling of captured Republican soldiers into the Nationalist army with the integration of General Andrey Vlasov’s Russian Liberation Army into the Wehrmacht. Yet the Nationalist leadership was much less reluctant to incorporate fellow Spaniards than the Germans were to allow a racial enemy, however anti-Bolshevik, its own autonomous military force. Leira notes that Franco in his “último discurso” (121) referred to his usual trilogy of enemies—communists, Jews, and Masons. Yet by 1975 the regime had reinvented itself sufficiently to avoid unveiled anti-Semitic rhetoric, and the reference to Judaism is absent from the Caudillo’s final address.

Even if postwar scarcities and repression disappointed many veterans, the Nationalists’ “miserable política asistencial” (62) may have been more generous

to soldiers and their families especially during the civil war but also after it than the author allows. The postwar period demands a more precise periodization which would distinguish periods of economic stagnation from those of growth during which veterans and others profited. The book might have been improved with more comparisons of the relatively well-fed Nationalist zone with its hungrier Republican counterpart. The author follows the contemporary tendency to expand the category of victims to include all kinds of groups, including Nationalist veterans suffering from what the Americans call PTSD.

These criticisms should not discourage scholars of the Spanish conflict from reading this innovative and significant work of social history. Leira makes a major contribution by showing more than the two or even three Spains that earlier analysts, who were usually political historians, have scrutinized. Readers will be rewarded aesthetically as well by striking and unusual photographs.

Michael Seidman
University of North Carolina Wilmington