

Review of The Spanish Civil War by Antony Beevor

Anarcho

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The Spanish Civil War, Antony Beevor

Originally published in 1982, this work has obviously been re-published to take advantage of the success of Antony Beevor's later work **Stalingrad**. It is a good thing that it was. Beevor has produced an exceedingly good, if short, work on the Spanish Civil War. Unsurprisingly, his account is primarily a military history, but do not let that put you off – he clearly understands the role of the revolution in Spain and how it impacted on the course and nature of the war (and in the conflicts in the Republican side).

Beevor attempts to analysis the Spanish Civil War from three angles: class interest, centralism versus regionalism and authoritarian rule versus libertarian instinct. Unsurprisingly, this means he discusses the anarchist movement (indeed, he places it at the heart of the story). His accounts of anarchism and the social revolution during the war are excellent. For example, he defines anarchism as a *“structure of co-operative communities, associating freely”* and which *“corresponded to deep-rooted traditions of mutual-aid, and the federalist organisation appealed to anti-centralist feelings.”* He makes clear that the anarchists were the main part of the labour movement as well as their key role in defeating the fascist uprising. He discusses the collectivisations that occurred in a positive light and notes the disastrous effect on the morale of the anti-fascist side when they were undermined and forcibly disbanded. Its nice to see a historian state the obvious as regards the Aragon collectives: *“the very fact that every village was a mixture of collectivists and individualists shows that peasants had not been forced into communal farming at the point of a gun.”* He even mentions and discusses the Mujeres Libres and quotes Malatesta when discussing the anarchist critic of reformism in syndicalism!

From an anarchist perspective, his account of the failings of the Popular Army makes interesting reading. Beevor argues that it was unimaginative in its tactics, with its (usually communist) commanders blindly following instructions even when circumstances on the ground made them inadequate. The army allowed its commanders *“little initiative,”* a dangerous condition when the lines of communication were disrupted by fighting (as was the habit of the commanders lying to their superiors in and after battles to save face). Used to centralised, top-down structures, the communists re-created these in the Popular Army and the results were the exact opposite of the efficiency and success promised. Ultimately, the Communist and Republican principle of “unified

command” and a regular, orthodox (bourgeois) army became a “*bureaucratic tourniquet*” which was defeated in almost every battle in the war. Indeed, Beevor accounts how its battle plans were usually drawn up simply to gain prestige for the Communist Party.

In this, his account is a useful antidote to those who argue that the militarisation of the militias was a necessary step in winning the war. As history clearly shows, the Popular Army was a disaster. As for the International Brigades, while acknowledging their members courage, he also paints a horrific picture of Communist Party control (which included the shooting of about 500 Brigaders, nearly a tenth of the total killed in the war) and mentions a few rebellions in their ranks.

While the militias were hardly perfect, it comes clear from his account that the Popular Army was not a good replacement. Beevor stresses that much of the problem with the militias, as George Orwell also argued, was due to their lack of experience rather than their libertarian nature. Beevor even argues that electing leaders was “*not so much a difficulty as a source of strength*” as it “*inspired mutual confidence.*” The question was how to federate the militia columns, not to abolish them. This solution, however, was dependent on whether the revolution would be successful.

Beevor gives a fair account of the dilemma facing the CNT after they had put down the coup in Barcelona. The dangers of isolation internally (“*Madrid had the gold*”) and externally (unofficial sanctions by governments and companies) and the fate of their comrades in other parts of Republican Spain obviously played a key role. However, he quotes Garcia Oliver’s comments that the alternative was either an “anarchist dictatorship, or democracy which signifies collaboration” without any analysis. Made in 1937, these comments are both historically and logically defective. On July 20th 1936, the CNT leadership decided to not mention libertarian communism until Franco had been defeated, yet his argument, if it was valid, was as much applicable to a post-Franco Spain as it was on that day. Ultimately, Gracia Oliver argued that representative democracy is more “democratic” than self-managed communes (hardly a valid position, particularly given the authoritarian and repressive nature of any capitalist democracy and the Spanish Republic itself in the 1930s). His argument simply reflected the CNT-FAI leadership’s attempts to justify their collaboration with the state rather than a coherent and accurate argument.

Of course Beevor’s work has its weaknesses. His account of the decisive CNT plenum on July 20th, as noted, is one. Similarly, his account of the uprising and suppression at Casas Viejas is wrong, relying as it does on accounts disproved by Jerome R. Mintz in his **The Anarchists of Casas Viejas**. Similarly, his account of the conflict between the radical anarchists and the treintistas is somewhat confused chronologically, but at least he does not paint the usual picture of the FAI seizing control of the CNT by conspiratorial methods. He does suggest that the FAI advocated sudden and fragmented uprisings while, in fact, most of the early uprisings were spontaneous and the later ones co-ordinated by the CNT itself (his account of Casas Viejas fits into this false picture of FAI activities). Ultimately, it would have been nice for the work to be referenced more completely, allowing the reader to investigate for themselves aspects of the Spanish Civil War and Revolution that Beevor discusses in too short a space!

However, be that as it may, Beevor’s account is to be recommended. His account of the first days of the revolution, when workers armed themselves when the government refused, is excellent. His summary of the collectivisations is positive. The role of the allied governments and foreign capitalists in stabbing the Republican government in the back is clearly shown. He even discusses the post-war resistance against Franco and the part played by Spainards in the French resistance.

All in all, an informative and interesting read.

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Review of an very good mainstream book on the Spanish Civil War. It places the anarchist inspired social revolution and the libertarian movement at the core of its account of the conflict.

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