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Cecil D. Eby, *Comrades and Commissars: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War*. University Park, PA: Penn State Univ. Press, 2007. Pp. xv, 510. ISBN 978-0-271-02910-8.

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Even before Generalísimo Francisco Franco declared victory in the Spanish Civil War, the politics of the conflict had provoked at least as much interest as had its military aspects. Although military operations certainly caught the attention of the war's many foreign observers, including such noteworthy analysts as J.F.C. Fuller and F.O. Miksche, to this day a large portion of the thousands of books on the war devote more space to bolstering or discrediting political arguments than to what actually happened on the battlefields of Spain.<sup>1</sup> Cecil D. Eby's new book on the Abraham Lincoln Battalion (ALB) is also a "political" work, both in subject and in argumentation, yet it never lets politics overshadow the soldiers themselves or the battles they fought. Indeed, this very engaging work brings the reader as close as any historian probably could to the chaos and horrors of the battalion's often disastrous participation in the battles of the Jarama Valley, Teruel, and elsewhere. At the same time, Eby paints a depressingly convincing portrait of the communist leadership and organization of the ALB and its sister North American units, the Washington and Mackenzie-Papineau Battalions. Building upon his study of nearly forty years ago, *Between the Bullet and the Lie: American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War*,<sup>2</sup> the book stands in strong contrast to the party-line version of the battalion's history that persists to this day, most recently in the summer 2007 exhibit at the Museum of the City of New York, "Facing Fascism: New York and the Spanish Civil War."<sup>3</sup>

Eby, a retired professor of English at the University of Michigan, is not a popular figure among the ALB's loudest veterans and spokesmen today, who—like their counterparts in most veterans' organizations—prefer to stress the heroism and sacrifice embodied by their unit's history rather than its less appealing aspects. Accordingly, many veterans and supporters have downplayed the battalion's communist roots and organization and the function of its umbrella association, the International Brigades, in Stalinist foreign policy, instead stressing the volunteers' role in the fight against European fascism.<sup>4</sup> Of course, the

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<sup>1</sup> Fuller wrote articles on the Spanish Civil War for *Army Ordnance* and other military journals during the conflict. Miksche's observations and analysis on the war are in his *Blitzkrieg* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941) = *Attack: A Study of Blitzkrieg Tactics* (NY: Random House, 1942).

<sup>2</sup> NY: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> See Edward Rothstein, "The Spanish Civil War: Black and White in a Murky, Ambiguous World," *NY Times* (24 Mar 2007) <<http://tinyurl.com/ytjd5p>>.

<sup>4</sup> Taking advantage of recent archival declassifications, Daniel Kowalsky has shed additional light on the origins of the International Brigades and their place in Soviet Foreign Policy: "The Soviet Union and the International Brigades, 1936-1939," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 19 (2006) 681-704. Unlike most authors citing newly available material from Soviet archives, including Eby, Kowalsky consulted original Russian-language sources rather than relying on published, translated documents. An oft-cited collection of such documents, which Eby draws from as well, is Ronald

latter emphasis has much merit, and one cannot help but be impressed by the lengths to which battalion volunteers went in the service of their ideals, regardless of whether they carried Communist Party membership cards (many did—a hardly surprising fact in the context of the Great Depression). About 750 of the some 2,800 Americans in the Lincoln battalion lost their lives in the war. Unlike George Orwell, who recounts his experiences with the “Trotskyist” POUM militia in his famous *Homage to Catalonia*,<sup>5</sup> the protagonists in Eby’s book saw ample large-scale combat, and they suffered enormous losses.

The narrative follows the story of the battalion from its inception as part of the Comintern’s International Brigades to the volunteers’ journeys to Spain, their largely inadequate military training, and their baptism of fire in the Battle of Jarama. Eby’s harrowing description of their costly, futile, and strategically meaningless assault across no man’s land vividly illustrates the deadly consequences of the poor planning, coordination, and leadership that persisted throughout the International Brigades’ presence in Spain. These problems recur with depressing regularity in the book, which takes the reader up to the battalion’s return to the U.S. and thereafter. Eby does not intend or claim to offer a full military history of the war; his focus remains firmly fixed on the experience of the Lincoln Battalion’s soldiers. Thus he writes little about broader military considerations, and the relatively few words he devotes to strategy serve above all to reinforce the already overwhelming sense of futility that permeates the book.

The chapter on the Battle of the Ebro, for example, includes not only a very good tactical-level account of the battalion’s small role in this very large-scale operation, but also a one-sentence condemnation of the strategic decision and lack of operational realism that left the American volunteers in their fatal predicament. “The underlying fallacy of the offensive,” Eby writes, became clear as the campaign unfolded: “soldiers could be transported across wide rivers more readily than the heavy equipment necessary to supply and support them” (396). Of course, the Battle of the Ebro and its outcome were not quite that simple, and readers wishing to learn more about the strategic and operational aspects of the campaign should consult some of the recent studies treating it, none of which are in Eby’s bibliography.<sup>6</sup> Yet at the most basic level he nonetheless captures the essential truth behind most of the battalion’s offensives: their futility. Even when the volunteers took part in a successful operation, as at Belchite, their tactical victory made scant difference to the war or even the campaign. In Eby’s book the war and the battalion’s role in it appear more tragic than anything else.

Yet as tragic as the war ultimately proved for the foreign volunteers fighting against Franco’s forces, for the Spaniards enlisted in the ALB the situation was even more dismal. Given the Francoists’ reputation for shooting all captured International Brigades members on the spot, the Spaniards forced to serve in the battalion and its sister units were understandably unhappy about their situation. To make matters worse, they found themselves at

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Radosh, Mary Habeck, and Grigory Sevostianov, eds., *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale U Pr, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> London: Secker & Warburg, 1938.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Miguel Alonso Baquer, *El Ebro: la batalla de los cien días* (Madrid: La Esfera de los Libros, 2003); Jorge M. Reverte, *La Batalla del Ebro* (Madrid: Crítica, 2003); and José Andrés Rojo, *Vicente Rojo: retrato de un general republicano* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 2006).

the bottom of unit hierarchy. According to Eby, the Americans sometimes treated them poorly, and their rations and privileges fell below that of the foreigners fighting in Spain. Eby's account of the Spanish members of the ALB draws heavily from the unpublished memoirs of Fausto Esteban Villar, a Valencian draftee who served in the battalion. Eby writes that he first learned of these papers when Villar wrote him after reading the Spanish translation of his first book on the battalion. Thanks largely to Villar's day-by-day account, the book offers a fascinating glimpse of the battalion's history from a Spanish perspective, telling the story of draftees like Villar and casting new light upon the attitude and behavior of many of the Americans toward their Spanish comrades. Although they eventually outnumbered their counterparts from the United States, the battalion's Spaniards remain largely absent from standard accounts of the ALB.

While the book includes examples of good leadership and brave feats at the tactical level, it also reveals considerable operational incompetence, thanks in no small part to figures such as division commander General Janos Gal (Galicz) and brigade commander Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Copic. Eby's account relates the poor leadership of Gal and Copic in part to communist party politics. These men owed their positions to the party, and they never forgot the constant party scrutiny under which they operated. But this scrutiny alone does not explain their incompetence—on occasion the help of more engaged Soviet advisors might have saved them from deadly errors. As Eby describes, the fundamental problem lay in the role political considerations had played in their appointments. Even at the lower level of the officer corps and among NCOs, ideological suspicions hindered the promotion of competent men.

The author's own thoroughly cynical appraisal of Communist Party intentions and actions is clear from the onset of the book. Probably because he feels he must overcome the strong force of well-established, politically correct mythology, he writes with a bitter sarcasm and irony that sometimes threatens to overwhelm the reader. Paradoxically, this writing style also helps make the book very readable and engaging, especially for those with a dry sense of humor, even if on a few occasions the "war story" prose comes dangerously close to cliché: "For a 'crummy bunch' they had done pretty well. There was plenty of grit left" (404). Of course, communist rhetoric makes an easy target; publications like the *Daily Worker* practically invite ridicule, revealing none of the irony that literary scholars like Paul Fussell perceive elsewhere in Western post-Great War writings.<sup>7</sup> But Eby goes further, showing the Communist Party's elaborate attempts to pervert history and manufacture memory in the service of the cause both during and after the war.

Regrettably, the source references in the book, in the form of asterisks and endnotes, are inconsistent and somewhat difficult to follow at first. Although the publisher probably chose to use asterisks instead of numbered reference marks in order to make the book more appealing to a general readership, from a scholarly perspective this and the incompleteness of the referencing are unfortunate, especially in light of Eby's explicit revisionism. He attributes, for example, the transformation of the battalion into a "brigade" to the American Communist Party's Central Committee in New York. The committee wanted, he writes, "to aggrandize the American participation at the expense of the other battalions of the

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<sup>7</sup> *The Great War and Modern Memory* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1975).

XVth Brigade” (29 n. 2). But he provides no clear and direct documentary source for this assertion. Admittedly, it is not difficult to believe Eby’s basic argument that the literature about the “brigade” resulted from a conscious effort by party officials to mislead, and he does not lack circumstantial evidence.<sup>8</sup> He shows elsewhere, for instance, how the ALB’s members voted to call themselves a battalion, although their will clearly had little effect on how their unit was presented to American audiences (40). Still, in this and other instances more plentiful, direct, and clear references would have been most welcome. More thorough editing might also have removed some of the book’s redundancies.

In spite of Eby’s constant attacks on the party-line version of the battalion’s history, his overall portrayal of its members is positive. He reveals considerable sympathy for the communist and non-communist soldiers he describes, at times referring to their pre-war struggles against blacklegs and other enemies of organized labor in almost heroic terms. His portrayal of Franco and his “Nationalist” cause, on the other hand, is extremely critical, although the book as a whole devotes little space to the rebel forces.

Above all, the book paints a thoroughly bleak picture of the battalion’s grave problems of morale, poor leadership, and desertion. It describes, for example, how International Brigades officials posted observers outside the U.S. consulate in Barcelona to catch deserters trying to find a way home there, many of whom then faced imprisonment or even the firing squad. Although Eby sometimes verges on portraying rank-and-file ALB soldiers primarily as victims, in general the actors in his book retain their agency. Indeed, many reveal a strong spirit of both independence and working class solidarity—even if this means going against party officials—that persists through their return journey to the U.S. through France. What remains most deeply etched in the mind of the reader, however, are the vivid and all-too-convincing depictions of combat and confusion on the battlefield, along with a strong feeling of awe for what the soldiers endured in their ultimately failed struggle.

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<sup>8</sup> Although it is difficult for the reader to be certain in the absence of clear and complete references for Eby’s oft-repeated explanation for the “brigade” misnomer, he probably comes closest to providing direct documentary support in a note mentioning Frederika Martin, the chief nurse of the American medical unit in Spain, who “was ‘embarrassed and ashamed’ by this grandiose lie to magnify the military role of the CPUSA. In her words, it was ‘purely propaganda.’” (29 n. 2). Unfortunately, we do not learn when or in what context she penned these words. Eby cites only the “Martin archive, box 19, B[randeis] U[niversity].” (This collection is now at New York University, which acquired the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives from Brandeis in late 2000 and early 2001. I am grateful to Andrew H. Lee of New York University for providing me with this information and for commenting on an early draft of this review.)