



*The Spanish Blue Division on the Eastern Front, 1941–1945: War, Occupation, Memory* by Xosé Núñez Seixas.

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The Eastern Front of World War II is usually depicted as a titanic clash between National Socialist Germany and Soviet Russia. In fact, neither opponent was monolithic, relying on, respectively, Axis allies from across Europe, and non-Slavic subjects from the Caucasus and Central Asia. The Nazi crusade against communism drew many Europeans to Adolf Hitler, who ordered his armies to fight a “war of annihilation” against Jews and communists in the USSR. The postwar revelation of the atrocities by the Nazi war machine in the East impugned the actions and motives of the soldiers of the other Axis allies. The passing decades only increased debates and controversies across Europe as the true scope of the horrors of the Eastern Front became clearer. Xosé M. Núñez Seixas’s new book on the Spanish Blue Division (hereafter, SBD) may well be the definitive history of the Spanish soldiers who fought on the Eastern Front. It weaves together war, society, culture, and memory into an admirable historical tapestry.

Núñez Seixas (Univ. of Santiago de Compostela) poses many questions, but his chief concern is with the motives of the Spanish soldiers. Consequently, he adopts the perspective of “New Military History” (or “War and Society”) to “update and enrich current debates” (9). Some 47,000 soldiers (plus a few airmen and sailors) served in the SBD and 5,000 died on the Eastern Front. A vast amount has been written about the SBD in Spanish, but mostly in the genre of commemoration. Much of the professional history of Spain during the Second World War focuses on diplomacy, culture, and economics. The official postwar narrative was that the SBD was the “blood price” Francoist Spain paid Nazi Germany to remain neutral (6). Anglophone histories of the Spanish role in World War II tend to concentrate on high-level relations between the Spanish and Germans. Núñez Seixas now offers a fresh, in-depth look at the volunteers who left Spain to fight in the USSR.

The book features an introduction, six thematic chapters, and a conclusion. The chapters address in turn: (a) motivations of volunteers, (b) deployment from Spain to the Baltic region starting in July 1941, (c) fighting on the front near Leningrad, (d) occupation practices, (e) diehards who chose to keep fighting with the Wehrmacht after the SBD was withdrawn (Oct. 1943), and (f) the memory of the Spanish experience on the Eastern Front in Francoist Spain. The dense chapters contain many engaging details, valuable insights, and myth-busting arguments. The book deftly clarifies the complex historiographies needed to contextualize the SBD within the wider conflict.

The Spanish Civil War was certainly complex and confusing, but readers will learn which groups (fascist, military, religious, etc.) were the main source of the SBD’s manpower. The author’s examination of the armies of independent Axis states (Finland, Romania, Italy, Hungary) and the volunteers recruited from Western Europe under Nazi occupation allows him to compare

Spanish soldiers with other Axis troops. Of course, he addresses the myth of the “clean Wehrmacht,” making his study a transnational history that adds weight to its conclusions.

Núñez Sexias shows the SBD to have been highly motivated: a single division of Spanish volunteers was more ideologically committed than Axis armies of many divisions of draftees. The SBD resembled units of Western Europeans who volunteered to fight in the Waffen-SS. Although Spanish fascists were a small minority in the ranks, they shaped the unit’s culture. Moreover, while the rest volunteered for diverse reasons—careerism, social pressure, adventure, youth, war fever, political rehabilitation, unemployment—Spanish volunteers generally shared nationalist, religious, and anti-communist views due to the USSR’s role in the Spanish Civil War.

Antisemitism was present but not potent, racism common but not extreme. As a result, Spanish soldiers were less brutal toward Jews and Slavs in the Soviet Union. Núñez Sexias emphasizes, however, that the SBD arrived after most of the Jews in the region had been murdered by German troops and Baltic collaborators; in addition, it was assigned to a fairly quiet part of the front with few partisans. Hence, the timing, location, static frontline, and nature of the partisan movement limited Spanish troops’ participation in the more horrific aspects of service on the Eastern Front. Thus, the SBD’s conduct fell “somewhere between the ‘clean Blue Division’ legend ... and the general characteristics that apply to most German Wehrmacht troops” on the Eastern Front (240).

*The Spanish Blue Division on the Eastern Front* makes for compelling reading. Readers get a good sense of the Spanish soldiers’ motivations and worldview, their life on the Eastern Front, and how they were perceived by German, Jewish, Polish, and Soviet observers. This accessible book should be read by anyone interested in modern Spain, the Eastern Front, Axis allies, or soldier motivation.

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1. Kudos to its translators.