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Review of Julius Ruiz, The "Red Terror" and the Spanish Civil War: Revolutionary Violence in Madrid

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No doubt the success of Ruiz’s 2012 prize-winning monograph *Madrid Rojo, 1936* informs Cambridge University Press’s decision to publish this very faithful and accomplished English translation based on an impressive treasure trove of archival and periodical research as well as secondary scholarship. Moving away from the lurid descriptions of the Soviet-style *checas* and the nefarious activities of the “uncontrollables” Ruiz (Lecturer in History at the University of Edinburgh) argues that the Terror in Madrid during the first six months of the Spanish Civil War was “not extraneous to the antifascist war” but rather “it was integral to it”(8). Depending heavily on the work of Georges Lefebvre’s *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France*, Ruiz argues that the acute violence as well as popular support for those perpetrating that violence in Madrid during the start of the conflict are explained by a fundamental “collective delusion” that held that there was a clandestine enemy among the residents of Madrid undermining them so as to deliver the community to the Nationalists.

That republican and Soviet leadership in Madrid needed to feed this fear suggests the so-called Red Scare had an internal dynamic and organization rather than merely responding directly to Nationalist Terror outside of the capital. This also helps explain the radicalization in the development of the organizations behind the atrocities, including the Provincial Committee of Public Investigation (CPIP), as well as why the Republican government seemed to drag its feet and not curb spontaneous anticlerical violence, or properly prosecute the monarchist-bloc leader Calvo-Sotelo’s assassins, and perhaps overlook Soviet/communist involvement in the Paracuellos Massacre. The bulk of the book meticulously details many of the facets and developments of the Madrid-based Terror, from the fate of the CPIP, the rise of the Rearguard Vigilance Militias (MVR), the propagandistic building up of the boogey-man that was the Fifth Column, and the mechanisms through which republican police brigades such as the Directorate General of Security (DGS) were complicit in issuing false release orders that delivered political prisoners into the hands of the CPIP for execution outside the republican prisons. As Seidman has alluded to in his review of the Spanish-language version of this book, the very interesting Chapter 5 (“The Justice of the People”) develops the argument that wartime Madrid never became Sovietized and that Russian propaganda had a very limited impact on madrileños. The grisly

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“motorized crime” procedure that involved taking a prisoner for a ride in a
confiscated car and shooting him – or her, as dozens of women, especially nuns,
were among the victims of the terror – in the city’s outskirts speaks to the
popularity of 1920s Chicago gangland wars that had filtered into the Madrid
population’s imagination through American, rather than Russian, cinema.
Although not as fully developed, Ruiz explains the relative absence of women
among the perpetrators of the Terror by asserting that “Gangsterismo was a
macho business in which females were excluded” because of entrenched cultural
assumptions about the “proper” role of women (139-140).

This is most definitely a history of the Terror in Madrid and not a history
of Madrid during that Terror. By this I mean that the accounts and descriptions of
terror are completely devoid of any effort to situate them in the historical
narrative of the Spanish Civil War, and especially the Battle for Madrid of 1936,
because the Civil War has seemingly been removed from the equation. The result
is a sense that the Terror is decontextualized because, though the period under
study includes Franco’s Battle for Madrid, the very real fear and actual damage to
the city at the hands of the Nationalists is not woven into the descriptions of and
motivations behind the organizations engaged in the Red Terror. Furthermore, this
book is highly dependent on the Causa General archive (the Franco Regime’s
official investigation of Red crimes that was carried out during and after the civil
war). Though noting the very problematic nature and Nationalist triumphalism of
this cache of documents, Ruiz defends the use of Causa General because it
contains a great number of Republican documents that might have been otherwise
destroyed. Still, while he asserts it cannot be “uncritically utilized” and that he has
used Causa General in conjunction with other sources, so many of the footnotes
give citations solely from the Causa General collection. These concerns do not
ultimately negate the meticulous and useful account of the Terror, nor the great
value this book offers to any modern Hispanist and research/university library.

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