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Review of Raanan Rein and Joan Maria Thomàs, eds. Spain 1936. Year Zero

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Rein, Raanan and Joan Maria Thomàs, eds. *Spain 1936. Year Zero*. Sussex Studies in Spanish History. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2018. 303 pp.

This volume comes out of a conference held to mark the eightieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Civil War. It has a novel premise. Rather than cover the conflict as a whole, it focusses on the initial moments of the war and their immediate impact. Borrowing the concept of “year zero” from Italian filmmaker Roberto Rossellini and Dutch author Ian Buruma, Raanan Rein and Joan Maria Thomàs asked their contributors to focus on the first few months of the conflict, “a brief, intense and crucial historical moment” (1) that largely determined what came years, and even decades, later. Those months, they contend, were absolutely transformative, turning “social and political cleavages into a Manichean struggle between two antagonistic camps, each one believing it represented the utmost good and was fighting the utmost evil” (9).

Some chapters are devoted to topics central to any history of the Civil War: the actions of countries such as France and the Soviet Union, the construction of the Francoist state, and the impact of the Civil War on women. Others—and here is the greatest novelty of this volume—deal with less well-known perspectives: athletes at the abortive Popular Olympics, the actions of the Salazar regime, Argentina, and Japan, and attitudes of Winston Churchill. The list of contributors reflects this dichotomy of topics. Some are well known to specialists on the Civil War, including Michael Seidman, Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, Inbal Ofer, Daniel Kowlasky and David Messenger, while others, such as Luciano Casali, Pedro Aires Oliveira, Haruo Tohmatsu, Leonardo Senkman, and Manuela Consonni, were, to me at least, unfamiliar.

The editors did well in putting Michael Seidman’s chapter first. Writing with his characteristic provocative flair, he calls 1936 a “magical year” (13) on a par with 1917, one that first gave anti-Fascism a global audience. But the Civil War was not just any kind of anti-Fascism; nor was it, as is often said, the opening round of World War II. Instead, it was a “revolutionary anti-Fascist struggle” (28) that foreshadowed the “People’s Democracies” of eastern Europe. Raanan Rein tells the fascinating story of Jewish athletes from Palestine who went, or tried to go, to Barcelona for the Popular Olympics, some of whom chose to fight for the Republic. Inbal Ofer describes how the first months of the Civil War provided women with “new opportunities for public activism” (109) while at the same time not constituting any kind of Year Zero since most women were mobilized into pre-existing organizations and there was no rupture in power relations. She also highlights the similarities between the mobilization of Republican and Nationalist women, with the greatest point of differentiation being the ways in which this mobilization was justified. Xosé M. Núñez Seixas demonstrates how the outbreak

of the Civil War was a “turning point” (79) in the way Spanish fascists viewed Nazi Germany. The most intriguing part of the chapter was Núñez Seixas’s analysis of the letters that ordinary Spaniards sent to the German embassy on Hitler’s birthday and following the invasion of the Soviet Union, portraying the German dictator as an “avenging angel” (84). David Messenger effectively guides us through the complexities of French responses to the Spanish conflict, emphasizing that these went well beyond a simple left-right binary and affected many parts of French society. He briefly mentions concerns in the Foreign Ministry about developments in Catalonia, including the possibility of a Unilateral Declaration of Independence and its effect on Roussillon, which had its own Catalan population, and Alsace. In light of the events of the last couple of years, one wishes he had been able to discuss this at greater length.

Two chapters deal with the Soviet Union. Daniel Kowalsky provides a well-argued account of the evolution of Soviet engagement with the Spanish Republic, although his description of Soviet intervention as “one of the most improbable events in modern history” (152) is a bit hyperbolic. Silvina Schammah Gesser and Alexandra Cheveleva Dergacheva’s detailed account of Rafael Alberti’s connections with the Soviet Union, and particularly his 1937 visit there, shows how this supposed “voice of the proletariat” (175) never confronted his Soviet past, leaving him a diminished figure.

There are chapters devoted to countries little mentioned or even ignored in discussions of the Spanish Civil War. Pedro Aires Oliveira gives a thorough account of Salazar’s policies towards Spain. Seeing the Second Republic as “an existential threat” to his regime and even fearing a possible Spanish invasion (118), he backed the Nationalists “without qualms” (120), offering various forms of support, including using his ties to Great Britain to promote Franco. At the same time, this most traditional of political leaders was concerned about what fascist domination of Europe would mean for a country whose relations with Britain were so crucial. Great Britain itself is absent from the volume, except for a curious and highly speculative chapter by Emilio Sáenz-Francés San Baldomero about Winston Churchill’s “chimerical thought” about the Civil War, which seems to come down to his having had a personal involvement with Spain. He also, strangely, refers to Franco as a “major figure” in World War II (227). Haruo Tohmatsu analyzes the impact of the Spanish Civil War on Japan, a country that had experienced an attempted military coup not long before July 18, 1936. The Civil War was, unsurprisingly, not a major issue in Japan, but it did connect “various issues in diverse and sometime unexpected ways” (247). The most intriguing one was through the Soviet intervention in the Sino-Japanese War on behalf of the Kuomintang and the Chinese evocation of the battle for Madrid as an analogy for their defence of the city of Wuhan. Finally, Leonardo Senkman explores Argentina’s policies of diplomatic and naval asylum, which were second only to

Chile's among Latin American nations. As one would anticipate, most beneficiaries were Nationalists, including Ramón Serrano Suñer, who travelled to Marseilles clandestinely on the naval vessel *Tucumán*, but Argentine policy also helped some Republicans.

The volume concludes with Manuela Consonni's unusual tribute to Renzo Giua, a young Italian who died in Spain in 1938, "with guns blazing" (270). She combines his personal story with that of the clandestine resistance to the Fascist regime in Italy. Giua's own story mostly consists of lengthy extracts from texts written "by those who knew him very well or very little" (271), as well as some letters he wrote to his mother. She borrows the structure from Hans Magnus Enzensberger's biography of Buenaventura Durruti, but her claim that Giua's story resembles Durruti's is unconvincing.

As Rein and Thomàs point out in their introduction, written in December 2017, the Spanish Civil War remains a "source of contention of controversy" (1), with debate still swirling around the Valley of the Fallen and the *callejero* of Madrid. Much has happened in the subsequent two years, including the dramatic/anticlimactic exhumation of Francisco Franco from the Valley of the Fallen broadcast live over many hours on October 24, 2019. Whether this will lead to the repurposing of this Francoist monument is, in the extremely complex current political situation, very much an open question. What is beyond doubt is that the production of scholarship devoted to this seminal event in Spain's— and Europe's— twentieth-century history will not slacken any time soon.

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Matthews, James, ed. *Spain at War: Society, Culture, and Mobilization, 1936-44*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. xii 263 pp. + 14 ill.

James Matthews, who previously won acclaim from the Association of Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies for his *Reluctant Warriors: Republican Popular Army and Nationalist Army Conscripts in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1936* (2012), can count this new edited volume as another achievement. Matthews gives this collection cohesion by bringing together twelve other scholars who can all speak and provide depth to one unifying topic. Namely, the volume's object is to allow the reader to understand what the experience of the Spanish Civil War was like for everyday people—soldiers and civilians—on both sides of the conflict. In so doing, Matthews hopes to demonstrate the agency that these participants exercised, bringing social and cultural analysis to the fore where political and military history have previously dominated the study of the civil war. Thus, he