

Angela Berg, Die Internationalen Brigaden im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg 1936–1939, Essen (Klartext) 2005, 308 p. (Rheinisch-Westfälische Hochschulschriften, 3), ISBN 3-89861-418-2, EUR 29,90.

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In the more than 60 years since they were founded, the International Brigades which participated in the Spanish Civil War have been subjected to as much mythologisation as any fighting entity in the twentieth century. In good part this was of their own making, since from their very inception the Brigades consciously and vigorously propagated an image of themselves as a bastion of pure antifascism, united in its dedication to rid the world once and for all of Hitler, Franco and their kind. The other side of politics had its role to play in this mythologisation of the Brigades also, since as far as Spain's insurgent generals were concerned, the International Brigades represented the long, godless and abhorrent arm of Stalin, committed by whatever means at their disposal to spread international communism to all corners of the globe. It is a safe bet, of course, that both versions of the myth of the Brigades represent severe distortions and misrepresentations. Proceeding from this assumption, Angela Berg sets out in her recent study to gain a clearer understanding of the actual historical experiences of the International Brigades and of the discrepancies between the politically charged myths and those realities.

Overall she manages to achieve this goal admirably. She does so with the aid of a wide range of sources, but above all she calls upon the archival sources located in the so-called SAPMO collection (Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR) in the German Bundesarchiv. Clearly this is quite a treasure trove for the historian of the Spanish Civil War, containing as it does very wide ranging reports relating to the activities of the International Brigades. In sorting through this vast array of material, Berg – fortunately – is at pains not to reproduce another history of the war in the form of a series of military events. Rather, her emphasis rests on everyday life in the Brigades, which means a shift of focus to events and circumstances behind the front.

It is not entirely surprising that the image conveyed falls some distance short of the idealism conveyed not only in the Brigades' own propaganda but also in the postwar romanticized depictions stemming from the GDR and elsewhere. That is not to say that the Brigades are accused of being devoid of antifascist idealism, but rather the historical record consists also of complex motivations, at times low morale coupled with high levels of desertion, political conflicts and disputes among the various national groups which made up the Brigades, occasionally vexed relations with local Spanish populations, and often catastrophic shortages of arms and other supplies both at the front and behind

it. In this way the study does indeed deliver on its promise of a more diversified and nuanced history of the Brigades; the extent of mythologisation in the existing histories is certainly more evident as a result of Berg's work. Having said that, the diversification still carries with it some limitations. The records upon which this account is largely based, although drawn from archival sources, tend overwhelmingly to be those of a leadership elite within the Brigades. On occasion first-hand accounts or memoirs are consulted in order to confirm or elaborate upon conclusions drawn from the archival record. While the point is well taken that memoirs in particular need to be treated with a good deal of skepticism, a greater use of them might have helped to promote a firmer sense of »history from below«. Secondly, the intended diversity does have its limitations, especially along national lines. Interestingly, the memoir literature cited is frequently English, but the archival sources are predominantly German. Although the book's title might imply an examination across the gamut of nationalities represented in the International Brigades, the heavy use of German sources results in a study whose conclusions apply above all to the German members of the Brigades; other national groups are relatively marginalized.

These limitations aside, this study nonetheless offers an impressive example of the way in which a careful and fresh examination of sources can not only deliver new insights but also overturn some old assumptions.