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Richard Baxell’s monograph, *Unlikely Warriors: The British in the Spanish Civil War and the Struggle against Fascism*, utilizes an abundance of oral history and personal testimony to tell the story of British involvement in the Spanish Civil War, from its foundation in the poverty and depression experience by the working classes during the 1930s through the end of the Second World War. The aim of Baxell’s study is “to place the Spanish Civil War within the context of the volunteers’ lives, rather than the other way round” (9). However, because the book is dominated by the War, Baxell falls short of his goal; and the War, rather than the volunteers’ lives, remains the focus. Nevertheless, this study contributes greatly to the limited research on the British fighters in the Spanish Civil War and also includes information on medical volunteers, reporters, and the involvement of British political parties.

Baxell’s work follows typical British volunteers from their hunger marches in Britain through their journey to France and nighttime passage through the Pyrenees into Catalonia. Baxell attempts to place the volunteers’ wartime experience in context by beginning his examination with their lives in Britain during the 1930s, including the overwhelming unemployment that allowed the working classes time to read Communist political pamphlets and solidify their own positions. Unemployment also allowed many workers the time to participate in political protests in Britain, and while defending Jews in the East End of London from the Fascists, these workers began using slogans taken from Republican Spain, highlight the first direct influence of Spanish events on their lives. Baxell initially generalizes this progression to almost every volunteer, although he later specifies that other parties, such as the Independent Labour Party, also sent volunteers and including a chapter dedicated to the small minority of soldiers who volunteered on the Nationalist side.

Baxell excels in the compilation of primary sources that offer insight into the soldiers’ lives once they arrive in Spain. He uses interviews and memoirs to illustrate key battles, such as the Battle of Jarama, the Battle of Brunete, the Aragon offensive, and the Battle of the Ebro; and he includes details typically excluded from military studies, such as the writing of letters of condolence to families of soldiers who died in battle. Furthermore, Baxell does not shy away from negative stories about the British Battalion. He mentions British soldiers who desert the army and British soldiers who volunteered as spies for the Communist party against the POUM during the May Days in Barcelona. His treatment of George Orwell is decidedly fair, stating that Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* is significant but that it also jaded opinions of Britons who only read Orwell’s account. Rather than the traditional hero-worship, Baxell includes unfavorable opinions of Orwell by his comrades.
Beyond Republican volunteers, his chapter on Nationalist volunteers shows similarities between the experiences of both sides, including lack of training, inexperience with weapons, and dislike of the Spanish diet, pointing out only that the Nationalist forces were more brutal than the Republicans when it came to intensity of training and discipline.

Beyond soldiers, Baxell also includes chapters on medical volunteers and reporters. The majority of medical volunteers served Republican Spain, and only one nurse and zero doctors helped the Nationalist forces, although Baxell includes the Scottish Ambulance Unit on the side of the Republicans even while denouncing them for helping Nationalist sympathizers escape Republican zones and British deserters escape Spain. The main focus on the chapter, however, is the Spanish Medical Aid Committee: a loose organization of approximately 150 doctors and nurses and 82 ambulances. Doctors who volunteered in the SMAC were often novices who came to Spain to gain experience quickly while nurses typically arrived with humanitarian aims rather than political agendas. Baxell follows the British Medical Unit, a subset of the SMAC, as they assisted the British Battalion, travelling from Barcelona to Madrid, tending the wounded at Jarama, Brunete, Aragon, and finally, the Ebro offensive. As with his coverage of soldiers and medical volunteers, Baxell includes information on reporters writing on both sides of the conflict. Reporters on the Nationalist side who failed to write about the justice behind the Nationalist cause were quickly removed, aiding the interpretation that newspaper reports were more propaganda than objective information. This opinion carried over to the other side as well with the Nationalists decrying the Republican news coverage of the Guernica bombing as propaganda while they simultaneously maintained that the Germans did not bomb Guernica.

Baxell concludes his monograph with the return of the volunteers to Britain, highlighting their heroes’ welcome juxtaposed with their inability to find work and the resentment of many families who felt abandoned by these soldiers. Many soldiers who went to Spain as Communists returned disillusioned, and others quickly joined them when Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler. Despite the widespread desire to continue their fight against fascism in the Second World War, the British policy restricting admission of International Brigadiers into the armed forces due to the fear that they had been subjected to Communist indoctrination during the Spanish Civil War prevented this desire from reaching fruition for many veterans. Baxell’s view of the Second World War as an extension of the Spanish Civil War, as well as the worldwide conflict that the Republican soldiers fought in Spain to prevent, further highlights his failure to set the War in the context of the lives of the volunteers rather than merely focusing on the volunteers’ lives while fighting in the Spanish Civil War.

Overall, Baxell’s use of extensive oral history woven into an
eloquent narrative creates a compelling story about the British Battalion of the International Brigades, but, as a historical account, aging soldiers’ faded memories can lead to problems of vagueness or exaggeration and even fabrication when relied on as historical fact. Even the chapter on prisoners-of-war held by Nationalist forces is biased as it only incorporates accounts from soldiers who survived. Perhaps the value of Baxell’s book lies more in the emerging field of history and memory than as a reliable account of the events surrounded the Spanish Civil War. Taken in this manner, Unlikely Warriors becomes a symbol of how soldiers and volunteers perceived the Spanish Civil War during the 1930s as well as a lasting testimony to how it has been remembered ever since.

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