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Review of "The Spanish Blue Division on the Eastern Front, 1941-1945: War, Occupation, Memory" by Xosé M. Núñez Seixas

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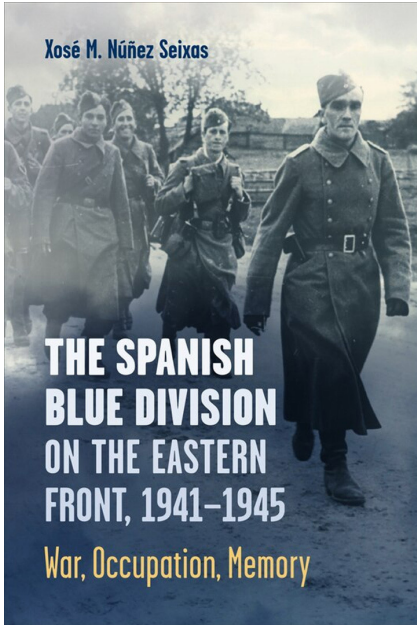
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Xosé M. Núñez Seixas. *The Spanish Blue Division on the Eastern Front, 1941-1945: War, Occupation, Memory*. Transl. Andrea Blanch, Daniel Blanch and Craig Patterson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022. Pp. xiv + 343.

Recent years have seen a flowering of scholarly literature on the volunteer contingents sent by the Third Reich's European allies, as well as various neutral European countries, to the Eastern Front during the Second World War. Their motivations and recruitment patterns, military performance, role in occupation and criminality, and post-war memorialisation in their countries of origin have all come under scrutiny. Until now, however, there was a lack of a detailed scholarly study on one of the best-known and most unusual of these contingents, the Spanish Blue Division, which served under Army Group North on the Volkhov and later South Leningrad fronts between 1941 and 1943.

There is more to such an undertaking than simply filling a research gap. As this new work by Xosé M. Núñez Seixas reminds us, Spain, as a neutral yet Axis-leaning power, held a unique status in Europe during the Second World War. Indeed, alongside Spain's supply of valuable raw materials to the Reich, the dispatch of the Spanish Blue Division to the Eastern Front constituted a blood price for continued Spanish neutrality – albeit one whose value was less military than propagandistic, syncing as it did with Nazi claims to be leading a continent-wide struggle against 'Judeo-Bolshevism'. During the post-war decades, with the Franco regime retaining power in Spain until the 1970s, volunteers were not ostracised by their compatriots in the way many in formerly occupied European countries were. At the same time, however, post-war sensitivities surrounding Spain's position in the NATO alliance militated against them being heroised. As a focus of scholarly investigation into soldiers' motivations, conduct and experiences, then, the unique character of the Blue Division ascribes it considerable importance. Based on an impressive combination of carefully utilised source material, including letters, diaries, front-line newspapers, post-war recollections and both Spanish and German official military documents, Seixas's study succeeds admirably in this task.

The Blue Division was, at least in its first incarnation, an entirely volunteer force raised in the opening months of the German campaign against the Soviet Union, and the main body of Seixas' study



commences by examining the motives of its first wave of volunteers. They were animated in large part by a desire to save western Christian civilization, specifically western Catholic civilization, from the ‘retrograde’ forces of communism. This desire was often intensified on a personal level for those seeking revenge for the deaths of family members at the hands of the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, this was one reason why particularly strong concentrations of volunteers hailed from areas that had been largely Republican-controlled during the 1936-9 conflict. Others were animated more by a spirit of adventure, while others still, too young to have fought in the Civil War,

sought to fulfil their ‘national duty’ by undertaking active military service and thereby advance their military careers. Like many of the European volunteers who flocked to the anti-Bolshevik banner, the Spanish volunteers hailed predominantly from middle-class and lower middle-class circles. Patterns of volunteering also displayed important regional variations, with particular concentrations from areas that had been Republican-controlled for much of the Civil War.

Yet while a fascist element within the division made its presence disproportionately felt both during and after the war, it constituted a minority of volunteers over the course of the Blue Division’s existence. Even then, they largely took their inspiration from Italian fascism – which they deemed more suited to a Catholic country like Spain – rather than from National Socialism. Among other things, they distinguished between their own cultural and historical anti-Judaism, harsh as it was, and the Nazis’ biological antisemitism, and generally did not associate Jews with Bolshevism in the way Nazi ideology did. By 1942, following serious losses sustained by the division on the Volkhov Front during the Soviet counter-offensives of the winter of 1941-2, volunteers were joining for more prosaic reasons such as economic advantage and reduction in their full period of military

service. By this stage, moreover, the Spanish government was topping up the division's numbers with coerced manpower.

Seixas builds a nuanced picture of the perceptions and conduct of Spanish volunteers in relation to the different national groups with whom they came into contact. Their journey through Germany to the front left them with a broadly positive view of the country – some reservations about Nazi sexual mores notwithstanding – seeing within it a greater degree of order than within their own country. They felt particular affinity with Bavarians and other Catholic Germans. Their aversion to the 'squalid' living conditions experienced by the Polish and later Russian rural populations whom they encountered mixed sympathy for civilians with culturally racist attitudes about the predisposition to fecklessness and disorder that they believed were characteristic of eastern peoples. Ultimately, however, the volunteers' general immunity to biological racism helped persuade them that the state of the Russian population was largely the work not of its inherent inferiority, but of a retrograde communist system from which it might yet be saved.

Such, moreover, were the small numbers of Jews and Soviet partisans within the area in which the Spaniards operated that two triggers of the annihilationist brutality characterizing so much of Axis rule in the East were largely absent here. There was little if any pressure upon the Spaniards to persecute Jews, even though they did witness escalating German antisemitic measures when marching to the front via urban centres like Rowno and Riga. The general shortage of partisan action in the Army Group North area up to 1943, meanwhile, made for more stable relations between occupier and occupied. For Russian civilians, striving to survive wartime privations, were more wont to cooperate with their occupiers in return for provisions when the threat of partisan retaliation for such cooperation was absent. It was these relatively measured facets of military occupation that would form a principal mainstay of Blue Division veterans' selective self-image during the post-war decades.

Yet selective it was, for the Blue Division's occupation record was not benign. Partisan attacks could still lead its troops to lash out in deadly frustration against the local population, and while its troops did not actively persecute Jews, nor is there any record of them actively seeking to protect Jews on those occasions when it might have mattered. Supply difficulties amid the often-appalling environmental conditions of the Volkhov Front frequently led to wild

plunder and requisitioning. Ultimately, moreover, the Spanish Blue Division was fighting in the cause of a brutal, racially conditioned war of conquest, exploitation and annihilation.

Seixas concludes that it was situational rather than national or ideological factors that determined the Spaniards' own relatively restrained conduct towards the Russian population. He compares them on this score with the Italians, whose religious and national background, and the cultural rather than biological character of their racism, makes them a more suitable point of comparison with the Blue Division than the Germans. Seixas points out that, despite these similarities, Italian troops behaved considerably more brutally and rapaciously towards occupied populations, and attributes this to the fact that the combat and occupation conditions they faced were considerably harsher than those experienced by the Spaniards. This point further scotches any residual notions of an intrinsically more humane, 'Mediterranean' way of fighting during the Second World War. That said, Seixas would have made the point more persuasively here had he compared Spanish and Italian troops in some detail. Space could have been made for this by dispensing with the brief chapter on Spanish volunteers for the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS during the period 1944-5, after the Blue Division itself had been disbanded following pressure from the Western Allies and the turning tide of war in 1943. This particular portion of the book adds little to its analysis, and detracts from its central focus on the Blue Division itself.

That criticism aside, however, *The Spanish Blue Division* is a highly impressive study, its arguments convincingly supported by a solid and diverse range of sources. It is written engagingly and accessibly, as well as judiciously and insightfully. Credit here goes not just to Seixas himself, but also to the translation team of Andrea Blanch, Daniel Blanch and Craig Patterson. *The Spanish Blue Division* is an important and valuable addition to the transnational historiography of Hitler's allied armies on the Eastern Front, one that will interest scholars of Spanish, German, eastern European and military history alike.

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