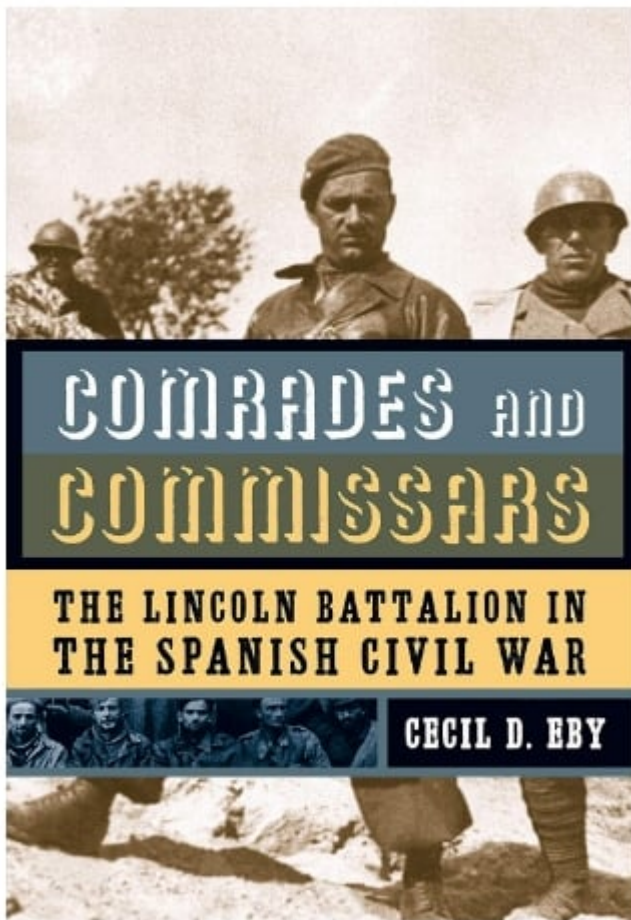


Eight Brief Reviews of Historical Books

By Armando Simón

Comrades and Commissars: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War by Cecil D. Eby



This book deals exclusively with the International Brigade that was fought in the Spanish Civil War. It is very specific and detailed and the reader is left with the feeling that he was right there. The author has relied not only on the “official” history (i.e., propaganda), but on countless participants who communicated with him. Not being content with being an armchair historian, the author also visited the battle sites. The viewpoint is strictly from the participants’ perspective

and the rest of the civil war is hardly touched upon in order not to distract the reader, but also because the International Brigade was deliberately kept in the dark of the machinations in the back.

For almost a century there has been a lot of horse manure written about the Spanish Civil War, most of it propaganda from the left. I was aware of some of misinformation, but I had no idea just how much misinformation there was. The

“brigade” was actually a battalion; this reclassification by the CP-USA was done in order to give the impression that there were many more volunteers. Most of the volunteers, it turns out, were Communist Jews from the East Coast. The Lincoln Battalion was despised by the Spanish army and the Russians and, as such, were undersupplied and totally untrained. The casualties were horrendous and there were desertions, so the CP-USA decided to accept non-Communist volunteers after the first military debacle. I was also unaware that the Spanish commander in chief was hostile to the Communist forces which he felt, quite rightly, that they would try to take over the country once the war was over. Nor was I aware that the “aid” that Russia sent to Spain was paid in gold bullion by the Spaniards and was inferior in quality and out of date. There is a lot more revelations in the book and I urge the reader to go over it, as the Spanish Civil War was one of the pivotal moments in history for psychologically and political reasons.

The Woman in Battle: A Narrative of the Exploits, Adventures, and Travels of Madame Loreta Janeta Velázquez by Madame Loreta Janeta Velázquez

This book is a tale of a real life Cuban woman inside the United States, who was always consumed with the idea of taking part in warfare. Accordingly, she joined the Confederacy forces as an independent, being a person of means and the widow of a Union soldier. At first, she disguised herself as a man and took part in several battles, as in Shiloh, but in the second half of the book she turned in her uniform for the chance to engage in espionage.

Right after the book was published, one man declared her to be a fraud (I suspect that the idea of a woman being a warrior was abhorrent to him). I have doubts about this conclusion for several reasons: she gives lots of details which ring true, she mentioned names of individuals that she met which would have proven her false if she was a fraud, she made observations on men and warfare that would come from someone

who was in the midst of the conflict. And, far from glorifying and sanitizing the men who took part in the conflict, the descriptions are realistic, both good and bad. Also, it is a long, long narrative. If she had written it as a fraudulent attempt at money, it would have been more logical to restrict herself to a specific battle or area. Since she was active throughout the conflict, there is a lot to write about.

Two things wrong. The particular edition I purchased is in dire need of editing. There are misspellings and even repetitions of paragraphs in the same page. The other part is in the narrative itself which, not being a Civil War scholar, I cannot judge. It is that, being "an independent" she could travel from one theater of war to another, always asking to be absorbed in a unit, but when not occurring she nevertheless took part in battles. My view of warfare is too contemporary to understand this situation.

Cortés and Montezuma by Maurice Collis

I am in the habit of buying book, keeping them until I get around to it. I bought this book over a decade ago and finally got around to reading it and am I glad I did. Earlier, I had finished reading a book on another subject and reading it was like going through the arctic in an icebreaker. *Cortes and Montezuma*, on the other hand, reads easily and attention grabbing.

Collins relates the saga from beginning to end, relying on primary sources. His unique approach is to attempt to present the way that both sides acted, or failed to act, because of the deeply ingrained cultural and religious values that were central to each of them. Particularly in the case of Montezuma, he constantly admonishes that we may think of his beliefs as superstition, and the constant sacrifices of victims to the gods repulsive, but to Montezuma they were as real, as valuable, as necessary, and as unquestionable as breathing. So the conflict in cultures and religion is as

important as the military aspect when examining the conflict.

Hotel U. S. S. R. by [Oleg](#) Atbashian

Communism tried to kill an artist's soul. They failed.

I ordered this book because I am acquainted with the author's hilarious satirical website, *The People's [Cube](#)* (in it, he sells a Communist version of Rubik's Cube—all the tiles are in red, in order to guarantee equity—great for a Christmas gift). I read the book in two sittings. It is an autobiography; the author gravitated towards art since childhood in the USSR. However, his inability to get adequate tutoring, plus his incurable satirical comments about the society that he lived in prevented him from advancing. Worse, since he did not *officially* qualify as an artist, he could not buy artist supplies from the State. Nonetheless, he continued to draw. At the same time, he and his friends became mesmerized by Western rock music that was smuggled in through tapes (the book's title derives from the song *Hotel California*: "You can check anytime you want, but you can never leave"). Later, he ends up as a teacher of English in a remote village, a worker in Siberia, and a mental patient, all the while drawing with whatever tools he can fashion. And making sarcastic comments. I have purchased some of his artwork. They are very good.

The Lincoln Conspiracy by Brad Meltzer

Conspiracy theories—make that conspiracies—have existed for centuries. One facet of Lincoln's life that is not as known as it should be is when Democrats tried to assassinate Lincoln before he could take office (sound familiar?).

Lincoln was the only presidential candidate up to that time that openly voiced his opposition to expand slavery into new territories. However, he repeatedly stated that there was no legal basis for outlawing slavery in states (he was, after all, a lawyer). Nonetheless, for stating so, the Democrats went berserk. All sorts of deranged predictions of the

apocalypse were printed in Democrat newspapers and verbally by politicians if Lincoln gained the presidency. All sorts of deranged, insulting, vile descriptions of the man were voiced and printed. These were nonstop for months, and Lincoln's name was removed from ballots in the Democrat strongholds (sound familiar?).

Before taking office, South Carolina had seceded from the Union, followed by other states.

Some of these deranged fanatics in Baltimore formulated a conspiracy to murder the newly elected president prior to taking office. Baltimore was rabidly anti-Lincoln, and the plan was to murder him once he and his entourage would switched trains to enter Washington DC.

A rumor reached the president of the railroad company of possible sabotage of tracks, so he enlisted Pinkerton's detective agency. Because this historical book reads like a novel, I will not go further and spoil it. But it would make one hell of a movie.

And, in case, it has not yet dawned on you, the very same hysterical and deranged reaction by Democrats occurred with Trump.

History does repeat itself.

Guests of the Ayatollah: The First Battle in America's War with Militant Islam By Mark Bowden

A thoroughly researched book. the author interviewed at length the various hostages of the Tehran embassy and reveals that each individual responded to circumstances differently, according to his personality. There were those who were defiantly courageous and those who practically groveled before the terrorists and others who withdrew into themselves or persisted in their bureaucratic outlook. The narrative is very detailed, and one should not expect to read this book in a

day. Even so, plodding through it is worthwhile. The Islamofascists' paranoia and verbal diarrhea is presented, and you get a distinct impression that trying to have a rational, intelligent dialogue with them was doomed to failure, so caught up in their paranoid conspiracies, their arrogance and their ignorance. As with Nazis and Communists, they, to this day, feel that there was nothing wrong in violating international law and holding the staff of an embassy hostage.

Throughout, Jimmy Carter's mediocrity comes across loud and clear (and to this day, like George W. Bush, he still thinks that he was a good president).

One can also get a glimpse at the zeitgeist of the 1970s. When the staff was captured, American liberals tripped over themselves to travel to Tehran to support this criminal action (just like they did at Hanoi during the Vietnam War), since the terrorists were rabidly anti-American and they joyfully participated in the terrorists' anti-American propaganda. In fact, several of the prominent terrorists had been educated (or perhaps it would be better said indoctrinated) in their anti-Americanism in American universities.

The Good German of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe by John Rabe

I picked this book up as a follow-up to watching the film, *John Rabe*. Others who reviewed that movie gave an unfavorable review at times because there were some details that were inaccurate. Upon reading the book, which is a compilation of Rabe's diary entries, plus documents, I concluded that the "inaccurate details" in the movie were insignificant, simply poetic license by the filmmaker.

Having said that, this book is one of the best published diaries available. The main thrust is the occupation of Nanking, the sickening, sadistic, slaughter carried out by the Japanese and the Herculean efforts of German and American

civilians (and one Dane) in protecting 200,000 Chinese civilians by creating a Safety Zone where refugees could take shelter and be fed and be protected from the invaders. Rabe was universally acknowledged to be the main pillar of strength throughout the ordeal. The problem that the Americans and Germans had was that they, too, were defenseless.

The Japanese have, in modern times, simply embraced denial as to what occurred, not only in Nanking, but all of China, and all through the Pacific in spite of the wealth of evidence (which they themselves provided). The Chinese have likewise embraced denial in acknowledging that these Westerners saved Chinese lives. They are not alone in this response. The Turks use denial about the genocide that they carried out against the Armenians (and expect the world to go along). The Serbs use denial about their ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. The Spaniards, for centuries (not so much now) employed denial about their own atrocities against the Indians in South America (they called it "the black legend" even though their actions were thoroughly, and amply, documented by the priest Bartolomé de las Casas). Only the Germans have been the exception.

That Rabe was never awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace and that, after WWII, both he and his wife nearly starved to death because he wasn't officially "denazified" for a long time just goes to show that there is no justice in the world. No good deed ever goes unpunished.

Gandhi: An Autobiography – The Story of My Experiments With Truth by Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi

I do not subscribe to the cult of Gandhi that is so prevalent in the English-speaking world, particularly England. Nonetheless, I had gotten the impression from bits and pieces here and there, as well as from a few films, that he was a good man who was instrumental in India's independence through passive resistance and so I got his autobiography in order to

better acquaint myself with the man and his times.

He wrote it at the insistence of his friends and, unfortunately, goes up only to 1921; that was a bit disappointing since a lot of interesting events came later.

Several positive things emerge from the text. As with many first person narratives, you get a better “feel” for the times, and relatively minor events are brought up that would otherwise be ignored by a formal history narrated by an outsider. I was struck by his genius at organization; successful political movements owe a large part of their success in being able to organization and planning. I was also struck by the highly unusual candor in revealing his own ineptitude and shortcomings early in his life; in most autobiographies, one gets the impression that the author never, ever, made mistakes. Gandhi, on numerous occasions in the book also chastises his countrymen for being nauseatingly filthy in their (lack of) elementary hygiene, something that I have personally noticed before. Lastly, I was surprised that his political activities had a religious foundation.

He was also courageous, honest, charismatic and stubborn.

Now, to the negative. In his personal life, he would be easily classified as a “crackpot.” He would easily admit it. I prefer to say that he was an insufferable jackass. I know that this may sound sacrilegious to those who worship at the cult of Gandhi, but consider this: he deliberately did not give his children an education, something that they reproached him for, justifiably so. When it came to health and nutrition, he was a crackpot, saying that cereals, milk, salt and food that was cooked were harmful to the body (I had previously thought that his spare diet was due to religious reasons). He eagerly adhered to the latest claims regarding bizarre “cures,” put forth by other crackpots. Worse, he forced these absurd practices upon his colleagues and family, even when some of them were at death’s door. As to his long-suffering wife, he

would neglect and sacrifice her needs and desires in order to help others, forgetting that charity begins at home. In short, he was very autocratic, this “saint,” forcing a cousin of his to get rid of a religious item that he (Gandhi) did not approve of (along these same lines, there is something that I read somewhere, long ago, to the effect that Gandhi was also something of a pervert, but I am not certain of its veracity).

In short, we see a man who is admirable in the public sphere, but with severe shortcomings in his private life.

One last point: I found it interesting that so many English people helped him and his friends. Narratives by the English leftists usually demonize the behavior of the English when it comes to India and Gandhi.

Armando Simón has degrees in history and psychology and is the author of *This [That](#) and The Other*.