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Review of: Gabriel Jackson, *Juan Negrín: Spanish Republican War Leader*

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“Spain,” Samuel Griswold Goodrich wrote in 1836, “is an instance of a great nation, occupying one of the most delightful regions on earth, degraded, poor, ignorant and weak, through the bad influence of a bad government.” Statements like these have abounded in histories of the country for almost three hundred years; the image of Spain as a noble people cursed with incompetent leaders has been one of the more persistent clichés spread by foreign observers, from Joseph Townsend (1786-87) and Richard Ford (1845) to John Crow (1963). As we know, the Spanish Civil War did little to modify this pattern; if anything, it sparked a widespread revival of Spanish stereotypes, including that of the perfidious and incompetent Spanish politician. Among the most maligned are undoubtedly the leaders of the Second Spanish Republic, variously described as inept, self-involved, irresponsible, impractical, deluded, or downright immoral.

None, however, has been as vilified as Juan Negrín (1892-1956), an accomplished physiologist born in the Canary Islands who served first as Minister of Finance (from September 1936) and then as Prime Minister, from May 1937 until—depending on one’s point of view—President Azaña’s resignation in February 1939, Franco’s victory on April 1 of that year, or Negrín’s final own resignation in 1945. History has not treated Negrín kindly. Over the past seventy years he has been alternately charged with womanizing, gluttony, stubbornness, a dictatorial leadership style, selling Spain out to the Communists, robbing the Spanish treasury, and the principal responsibility for losing the war. These charges were leveled against him not only by Francoist historians, but by important sectors of the exiled Spanish Left, including the leaders of Negrín’s own Socialist Party such as his friend-turned-nemesis Indalecio Prieto.

One of Gabriel Jackson’s major achievements in this engrossing biography is to move beyond the mountains of stereotype, slander and half-truths, and to use all the available evidence to paint the portrait of complex man facing extremely complex circumstances; a fundamentally honest and decent human being who sacrificed his health, reputation, and academic career in a failed attempt to save his country from disaster. Jackson’s book covers the whole of Negrín’s life, with the bulk of the chapters dedicated to the years 1937-39. As a biographer, Jackson brings to the table not only years of painstaking research—including new archival materials and dozens of interviews with Negrín’s friends, family members, colleagues and their children, conducted over a forty-year time span—but also a significant dose of human understanding and intuition, mediated through his knowledge of Spanish history as much as his own life experience as non-Communist social democrat barely thirty years younger than his subject. (For a political biography, *Juan Negrín* is in fact a remarkably personal book.) Indeed, Jackson is forced to engage in a fair amount of speculation, given the limited evidence available: in contrast to many of his colleagues, Negrín, an extremely reserved man, kept no diary and his extant correspondence is too scant and impersonal to give much insight into his

emotional, sentimental, and philosophical state of mind. The result is an eminently readable, refreshingly straightforward account of an accomplished scientist and cosmopolitan intellectual who in normal circumstances would have never had to become a politician, let alone take his country's reins during the most difficult years of its long history. Jackson's *Negrín* is a welcome addition to other recent reappraisals of the Prime Minister's life and career, including Enrique Moradiellos' *Don Juan Negrín* (2006) and Ricardo Miralles' *Juan Negrín. La República en guerra* (2003).

Jackson reaches a number of important conclusions. He is able to convincingly dismiss the three charges that are most frequently brought against Negrín: that he was an indifferent to—or, worse, an accomplice in—the abduction and murder by Soviet secret service agents of POUM leader Andreu Nin; that his policy of resistance at all costs, even in the face of imminent defeat, was unreasonable and irresponsible; and that he needlessly sold the Republic out to the Soviets. Jackson dedicates a full chapter to the Nin case, arguing that Negrín, who had just been appointed Prime Minister, had no choice but “to accept the cover-up as the price of continuing cooperation with the Republic's only powerful supporter, the Soviet Union” (77)—all the more so given the confusion surrounding the precise circumstances of Nin's fate, the full facts of which did not surface until the 1990s.

It's the same political pragmatism that, in Jackson's analysis, drove Negrín's close collaboration with Spanish and foreign Communists during the war, or that inspired the idea (which Jackson insists was indeed Negrín's, not Stalin's) to send the Spanish gold reserve to the USSR for safekeeping and, later, to buy arms. Negrín, though a member of the Socialist Party since 1929, was no crypto-communist or even a fellow traveler; he was not even, strictly speaking, a Marxist, but rather a staunch Social Democrat.

From the moment he took charge of the Spanish government, Negrín insisted on the need to win the war, a position he maintained even as a Republican victory became less likely and finally impossible, and as an increasing number of military and political leaders of the Republic threw in the towel. Jackson argues that Negrín's policy of resistance was anything but irrational. For one, Negrín was right to suppose that Franco would not accept a negotiated surrender without bloody reprisals (the illusion that sparked Casado's coup of early March 1939). He was also right, given the circumstances, to conclude that the Republic's only hope was to stick it out until the inevitable outbreak of a world war, which would very likely align the democratic West with the Republic in its fight against the Nazi-Fascist axis. That Negrín nevertheless lost his wager was in large part because the cards were stacked against the Republic all along. One factor contributing to Negrín's lack of success was the pessimism and covert or overt sabotage—Jackson calls it “betrayal”—on the part of his Negrín's fellow Republican leaders (148, 169). More important was the fact that the Republic faced tremendous odds from the outset, including the Nationalist military superiority, the Republic's internal divisions, and European non-intervention. In this context, Jackson strongly emphasizes “the hostility, from Day One, of the Conservative British government,” which was unable “to credit the changes which occurred in the Republican zone after the first weeks of terror and chaos” (102), and which all but forced France to leave the Republic out in the cold. For Jackson, the lack of support from the democratic West was not just immoral,

but tragic from an historical point of view: “if the Western democracies, plus the United States, plus the Soviet Union, ... would have substituted a defensive alliance for the policy of appeasement, Hitler and Mussolini could have been defeated without a world war” (169).

Jackson’s *Negrín* is no whitewash. The biographer has no problem acknowledging his subject’s significant weaknesses: his lack of organization; his impulsiveness; his habit to make important decisions without consulting his cabinet; his “wild side” or “mercurial streak” (128, 121, 295); his inclination to avoiding unpleasant but necessary topics of conversation; and his tendency to hide his “ambitions for personal power” by coyly stating that “he was not a politician” (123). On the human and moral side, however, Jackson forcefully rejects the image of Negrín as a poster child of the seven deadly sins. Negrín, he indicates, always treated his fellow human beings with utmost respect and was capable of a tremendous, self-effacing generosity. Not only did he place “a great deal of emphasis on good manners and personal courtesy” (10), and honored those whose political and religious outlook on life differed from his; but in fact he was one of the very few among his colleagues never to speak badly about others as individuals. “There are lots of nasty anecdotes about Negrín,” Jackson points out, “but not by Negrín against others” (139).

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