

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Struggle for Madrid: The Central Epic of the Spanish Conflict 1936–1937* by Robert G. Colodny

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By focusing somewhat narrowly on the professions, *Toward the Healthy City* neglects the deeper discussion that is needed to get at the more definitive factors underlying the cities' sorry state. Changes in global capitalism, and more specifically the U. S. capitalist regime, over the last three decades — not wayward professionals — have given us a health-industrial complex aimed first at maximizing profits for investors and only incidentally improving public health. The “public” in public health is increasingly unimportant when the role of the state is restricted to the promotion of private accumulation. In a consumer society in which overproduction, conspicuous consumption, planned obsolescence, waste and pollution are essential parts of the formula for success, bad health offers splendid opportunities for new industries. The problem isn't just “health disparities” but a system that produces and reproduces poor health and deep economic and social inequalities, and a health-industrial complex designed above all to maximize profit for the insurance industry and health care providers instead of improving health. As for urban planning, in a nation constitutionally wedded to the sanctity of private property in land, public planning has never been valued except when it protects property values. Without understanding clearly the broader political and economic constraints, locally-based social movements and their professional allies can seriously underestimate what it will take to bring about fundamental change, or forget altogether why that change is needed.

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The Struggle for Madrid: The Central Epic of the Spanish Conflict 1936–1937, by Robert G. Colodny. New Brunswick, New Jersey/London: Transaction, 2009. Paper, \$29.95. Pp. 256.

There are historical works in which the author's own involvement with the subject matter gives the text a particular quality and intensity that no subsequent account, however more accurate, can supersede. Among the thirty thousand books inspired by the Spanish Civil War, only a handful falls into

this category, including, I would argue, Robert Colodny's *The Struggle for Madrid*, first published in 1958.

The Spanish Civil War broke out in the summer of 1936, after a failed military coup meant to overthrow the democratically elected Popular Front government of the Second Spanish Republic. The almost immediate internationalization of the civil war — with Hitler and Mussolini coming to the aid of the military rebels — convinced large sections of public opinion in the West that the outcome of the war in Spain would determine the fate of the rest of the world. The major democratic powers — France, Great Britain, and the United States — remained neutral, but the Soviet Union and Mexico provided support for the embattled Republic. Meanwhile, the Comintern led an effort to recruit international volunteers to enlist in the Republican army's International Brigades. An estimated 40,000 men and women heeded this call, among them some 2,800 from the United States. Robert Colodny was one of them.

Colodny's book, reissued in facsimile by Transaction in 2009, is a reworked version of the dissertation he finished in 1950 at the University of California at Berkeley. Although it aims to be a straightforward piece of military history, it's in many ways a curious work. For one, the book has more notes than main text; some of the endnotes are fully fledged essays in their own right. Colodny's account is also remarkably impersonal. It is clear he has decided to write this account as a rigorous historian, not as the man who joined the Republican army at age 22, fought at Jarama and nearly got killed at Brunete and then again, after a lengthy recovery, at Teruel. Throughout the book, Colodny never once slips into the first person. Instead, he largely limits himself to the facts on the ground: what happened, when, where, and why. He is not afraid to provide exhaustively detailed lists of actions, participants, and military units. At the same time, he recognizes that his sources are limited — many of the archives were still inaccessible — and modestly presents his work as a "preliminary investigation." This modesty is only partly warranted. As a work of military history, *The Struggle for Madrid* is a concise but remarkably complete analysis of the ways in which the Republican forces — only partially and recently centralized — managed to withstand what, by all objective measures, was a superior enemy.

And yet despite what must have been an extraordinary exercise in self-discipline — or maybe because of it — Colodny's personality and politics shine through on every page. In the forceful prose, for instance, whose dramatic starkness sometimes borders on the poetic. He also has a sharp eye for irony: "Thus in a matter of weeks after General Franco had risen to save Spain from Bolshevism, he had been instrumental not only in bringing a Moorish army back to Spanish soil; he had also provided the occasion for a communist army

to spring into being to oppose, under the banner of the hammer and sickle, those Islamic forces driven from Spain five centuries before" (20).

The historiography of the Spanish Civil War continues to be as divided as it ever was, in Spain itself as much as in the English-speaking world. Controversy abounds, on the character of the atrocities committed on both sides; the role of the Communist Party and Stalin's Soviet Union; the nature of Juan Negrín's tenure as Republican Prime Minister; etc. Colodny is no exception in this regard. In fact, he sees his role in part as one of passing unforgiving judgment on the decisions and actions of those involved. Much like the many Spanish memoirs-cum-debriefings published by Republican exiles in the wake of the defeat, Colodny's book could have been subtitled "What Went Wrong." Throughout, one senses the frustration of the Lincoln Brigade veteran who knows that his cause has lost an historical battle that could have been won. "There is nothing more pathetic than an 'if' in military history," Colodny writes on the last page of his book, checking himself after having briefly imagined the hypothetical course of the war if the Republic's offensive at Brunete had been more successful. The aphorism reflects the anti-sentimental, disciplined, martial spirit that informs the whole book. To be sore losers, Colodny tells us, should be beneath our dignity.

Colodny is particularly irked by the Republic's lack of organization, unity, and discipline, and its poor military command — in short, its amateurism. And it's especially the anarchists and Francisco Largo Caballero who come in for harsh judgment. In Colodny's account, the main counterbalance to these centrifugal and uncontrollable tendencies on the Republican side were the Communist Party, the Soviet advisors — but also the sheer fighting spirit of the Spanish people and crucial support from the International Brigades. When all seemed lost, and everyone thought the capital was about to fall to Franco, "Madrid decided to defend itself," Colodny writes. "At dawn of November 6, Madrid lacked a leadership that believed in its capacity to resist and a brain and will capable of organizing its resistance. By nightfall, at H-Hour minus two, it had both" (45).

The blood shed by the International Brigades had a double exchange value. It stopped Varela's army at the moment when the militia's lines were stretched to the breaking point. In dying scientifically, the volunteers showed the Spaniards how to save their own lives. (68.)

Later in life, after a decade of teaching at the University of Pittsburgh — where he survived an early blacklisting attempt — Colodny would allow himself a more personal and philosophical take on the Spanish Civil War and the role of international volunteers like himself. In 1967, he gave a talk on Spain and Vietnam that was published by the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

Three years later, in the first chapter of *Spain, the Glory and the Tragedy*, he wrote an impassioned defense of the historian's duty to bear witness:

No longer does it serve any useful purpose to portray the horror of war. After Auschwitz and Dresden; after Hiroshima and a thousand nameless Indochinese villages liberated by napalm, appeals to the ethical sensitivity of mankind are not apt to alter the geopolitical plans of existing power elites. . . . The historian need be convinced of only one truth to make his craft meaningful in the context of today's disasters: the memory of mankind is sufficiently complete, sufficiently charged with the symbols of past political crimes, so as not to allow self-appointed guardians of human destiny to execute with impunity the same blind policies which led to boundless suffering for nameless millions during this century. (1, 6).

Transaction should be lauded for re-issuing Colodny's classic text. That said, the publisher could have taken advantage of the opportunity to correct some obvious typographical mistakes, especially evident in proper names and quotations from non-English sources.

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Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx, by Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. \$27.50. Pp. 264.

With so many Marxists affirming the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, it's odd that so few reference hermeneutics. Indeed, while Marx emphasizes change in the eleventh thesis, he never denigrates interpretation. Nevertheless, if hermeneutics is the "art of interpretation," one of the high arts of bourgeois philosophy *qua* conservative metaphysics, one that focuses almost solely on interpreting the world but frets about actually changing it — where praxis is reduced to interpretation alone — then perhaps we can understand why many Marxists have shied away from it. All the same, while attempts to construct a Marxist hermeneutics remains an unfinished project, neglecting works like Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960) or Paul Ricoeur's *From Text to Action* (1986) only shortchanges readings of the *Communist Manifesto*, *The German Ideology*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, and so on.