

## Roosevelt's Embargo on Spain

*FDR and the Spanish Civil War: Neutrality and Commitment in the Struggle that Divided America.* By Dominic Tierney. Duke University Press: Durham & London, 2007.

### By Soledad Fox

During the Spanish Civil War, many Americans viewed the isolationist policy of Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration as the key obstacle facing the Spanish Republic. For his wife Eleanor, the President's policy was a source of shame and frustration. In April 1938, she wrote to the pro-Republican correspondent Martha Gellhorn: "... I understand your feeling in a case where the Neutrality Act has not made us neutral...the Neutrality Act is really not a Neutrality Act, but very few people realize it."

Gellhorn was one of the many influential American writers who covered the war in Spain and lobbied tirelessly for Washington to repeal the arms embargo imposed on the Spanish Republic, which struggled to defend itself against Franco's better-equipped forces. While Mussolini and Hitler supplied the military rebels copiously, the Republic had nowhere to turn to buy arms. Gellhorn and others were in due course disappointed by the President's intransigence since his own doubts about the policy had been steadily mounting.

Dominic Tierney's study maintains that Roosevelt had, especially as the war progressed, an increasing sympathy for the Republic. Tierney examines the opposition between

Roosevelt's private inclinations and the official foreign policy of non-intervention. So why wasn't the embargo lifted? Did pressures from American Catholic organizations hem him in? Did he think it would weaken popular support for his administration? Was he afraid of upsetting U.S. relations with the British and the French?

According to Tierney's nuanced reading, there was a complex web of domestic and international factors constraining Roosevelt's Spanish policy, despite intense pressure to change it. The embargo had stirred widespread and passionate dissent in the United States. Some, as Tierney says, idealized the Republic, others demonized it and in turn glorified Franco's Catholic "crusade." The mere suggestion of any official aid—whether military or humanitarian—to Republicans was suspect and politically charged. In 1937 U.S. Catholic politicians even opposed a proposal backed by Ambassador Claude Bowers and Eleanor Roosevelt to bring Basque refugee children to the United States.

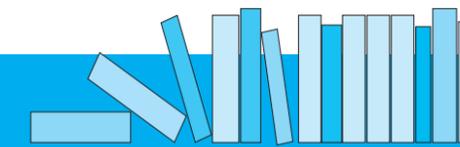
Tierney provides a long overdue update on this subject. He reviews existing works in light of new findings from Russian and American archives, and his analysis underlines the international ramifications of the war and shows to what extent its outcome was the consequence of decisions made elsewhere, particularly in Washington. Roosevelt's stance towards the Spanish Civil War emerges as neither heroic nor indifferent but "marked variously by creativity, inconsistency,

activity, incoherence, experimentation, as well as both flexibility and inflexibility."

Tierney traces Roosevelt's evolution as he came to doubt the merits of the embargo and struggled to circumvent its legislation. He relates the fascinating episode in May 1938 when the President became involved in a "hair-brained," "outlandish," and covert attempt to ship planes to Spain via France. Although the plan was leaked, and eventually failed, it reveals a leader who tried to aid the Republic without seeming to break with his own policies.

Even for most readers who know the outcome of this story, Tierney's account manages to be suspenseful. It was always, of course, highly improbable that Roosevelt would reverse the embargo, yet his chameleon-like political persona consistently gave Republican supporters hope that a radical shift in U.S. policy was imminent. When it was too late, Roosevelt could only offer his remorse to the Spanish Republic. In January 1939, he addressed his cabinet and, as Harold S. Ickes recalled, stated for the first time that "the embargo had been a grave mistake...that we would never do such a thing again." Eleanor would always deeply regret the American embargo of Spain, and she was quick to assign blame collectively and to her husband: "We were morally right, but too weak. We should have pushed *him* harder."

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*La soledad de la república: el abandono de las democracias y el viraje hacia la Unión Soviética.* By Angel Viñas. Barcelona: Crítica, 2006. ISBN 84-8432-795-7.

*Tío Boris: Un héroe olvidado de la guerra civil española.* By Graciela Mochkofsky. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2006. ISBN 950-07-2730-7.

### By Daniel Kowalsky

Nearly a generation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the once closely-guarded secrets of the now defunct communist state continue to cast new light on the history of the 20th century. For researchers working on the Spanish Civil War, recent investigations have been unusually fruitful and have gone a long way towards demystifying key episodes of the Iberian imbroglio that began in July 1936.

Among the most important new books currently available only in Spanish is *La soledad de la república*, the first volume of Angel Viñas's eagerly anticipated trilogy on international dimensions of the war in Spain. Viñas is an unusual figure in post-Franco Spain: at once diplomat, economist, historian, and occasional gadfly for the reactionary Spanish right. The principal thesis of this study, revealed in its title, is that the Spanish Republic

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turned to Stalin's Russia only after Madrid had exhausted all hopes of winning military assistance from Britain, France, the United States and other Western democracies. The Second Republic had no ideological affinity with Soviet communism, and the eventual alliance with Stalin was a last-ditch measure by the besieged and desperate government of Largo Caballero. To make his case, the author assembles an exhaustive bibliography and mobilizes an impressive array of previously unexplored empirical evidence, whose provenance ranges across Europe and the Americas. Most tantalizingly, Viñas uses hitherto unavailable Russian documentation to flesh out Soviet-Spanish ties as they gradually emerged in autumn 1936.

Viñas's work matters for two reasons. First, this book is a much-needed antidote to the current trend towards historical revisionism in Spain, most strikingly characterized in the best-selling *Myths of the Spanish Civil War*, Pio Moa's simplistic exercise in updated fascist propaganda. Central to the revisionist approach to the civil war is the tarring of the Republic as a "red zone," a Stalinist redoubt eager for conversion to a East Bloc-style people's democracy, and thus requiring a purifying, if bloody, crusade. Viñas's meticulous research and measured conclusions convincingly argue that it was Britain's intransigence that drove Madrid towards the Kremlin, but

strictly for reasons of self-preservation. Second, this scrupulously-documented tome serves as repudiation of a lamentable trend in historical publishing on the war: that of lightweight, anecdotal, or synthesized pseudo-histories, which have nothing new to offer but appear in greater numbers every year.

Equally satisfying, though for different reasons, is *Tío Boris*, whose author is Graciela Mochkofsky, one of Argentina's leading journalists. Still in her 30s, Mochkofsky has authored half a dozen books on far-flung topics, and she has held senior posts at several newspapers in Buenos Aires. While Viñas writes from the perspective of a diplomat/historian seeking to fulfill his public and academic responsibility, Mochkofsky's motivation is far more personal. She writes to unravel a family mystery and to rescue from obscurity a courageous but maligned relation, her great uncle Benigno.

Born in 1911, Benigno was an active communist from his early teens, but he would be disowned by his parents and henceforth referred to derisively as "Boris." The author of this fascinating, suspenseful, and often moving biography had never heard of her lost uncle until 2003. Then she learned that he had fought in Spain with the International Brigades.

Starting from scratch, Mochkofsky painstakingly fleshed out the tumultuous and often miserable life of an outcast militant who would find himself in the Fifth Column. Taking the *nom de guerre* "Ortiz," he fought alongside the more celebrated Argentine communist Vittorio Codovilla and

Continued on page 20