Plum on McLellan, 'Anti-Fascism and Memory in East Germany: Remembering the International Brigades 1945-1989'

Review published on Tuesday, November 1, 2005


Reviewed by Catherine Plum (Department of History, Western New England College) Published on H-German (November, 2005)

Antifascist Veterans, Self-Censorship and Competing Memories in the SED

Josie McLellan's monograph on German veterans of the International Brigades is a thoughtful and well-researched study of the veterans' experiences in the Spanish Civil War, the memories they shared with close friends and family, and the way in which their personal, subjective stories were largely marginalized in the GDR. Along with Michael Uhl's recently published research, McLellan's text contributes to a growing literature on political antifascism in East Germany by examining the multiplicity of antifascist memories within the SED.[1] McLellan endorses a differentiated view of the SED in general and antifascist veterans in particular, arguing convincingly that the veterans could be simultaneously "a party functionary, a victim of political justice, a censor, a reader, and a family member" (p. 12). An extensive examination of veterans' correspondence, memoirs, and literary contributions form the basis of this study along with fourteen oral history interviews.

McLellan's text begins chronologically with a chapter on the varied backgrounds and war experiences of the German volunteers fighting on the Republican side in Spain (Spanienkämpfer). The veterans' diverse backgrounds and the roles they played during the war affected the way in which leading members of the communist party and then the SED viewed them in the 1930s and in the GDR. Spanienkämpfer often faced accusations and denunciations both during the civil war and during the Stalinist purges of the early 1950s. As some veterans faced trials and the threat of imprisonment in the latter period, Spanienkämpfer generally remained silent in the public sphere hoping to divert attention away from themselves. Despite this tumultuous beginning in the GDR, McLellan describes how leading SED members eventually came to accentuate the history of the International Brigades because it provided a precedent for a socialist army as well as examples of consequent armed resistance, the type of antifascist activism that carried a privileged status in literary texts and commemorative rituals. Meanwhile, many Spanienkämpfer detected in published stories of individuals like Artur Becker and Hans Beimler an overemphasis on heroic action, the whitewashing of personal and unsavory details and in some cases the fabrication of the story line. Nevertheless veterans largely kept their opinions to themselves on this issue and generally followed this model publicly while they were much more candid in private. Additionally, McLellan establishes for the record how veterans frequently shared their manuscripts with other Spanienkämpfer and often practiced self-censorship before publishers and the official censors saw their work.
Finally, a chapter on the so-called Second Generation details the reception of certain groups of younger East Germans as the official narrative began to lose ground to alternative stories of the Spanienkämpfer in the 1970s and 1980s. Although it is situated oddly in the middle of her monograph, readers will find McLellan’s discussion of subsequent generations to be as interesting and informative as her contrast between lived experience and co-opted history. According to McLellan, in the 1970s and 1980s some members of younger generations adopted competing antifascist models and alternative perspectives from stories told within veterans’ families, literary allusions, film and cabaret references, and the broadly popular Wolf Biermann songs with references to Spain. Anarchist elements within the International Brigades and different strategies for land reform in Spain suggested to at least a minority of East Germans an alternative to the reality of state socialism in East Germany.

Social and cultural historians as well as literary scholars will certainly benefit from this fascinating text. The narrow focus on the German Republican volunteers rather than all German antifascist activists allows McLellan to weave together a necessary post-communist account of the volunteers and contrast this history with veterans' private memories and appropriated memories that served SED leaders. On the other hand, an alternative approach examining antifascist veterans and their memories more generally would reveal more complexities and contradictions within the official narrative, including more stories of female resisters and partisan fighters active in Germany during the National Socialist period and in German-occupied territory--stories that appear too frequently in GDR youth magazines and literature to fall outside of the official narrative.

Inevitably McLellan’s text leaves a few unanswered questions which may be of interest to historians. McLellan argues that the censorship process actually allowed Spanienkämpfer to participate in a dialogue with the regime over the portrait of the brigades and the progress of the war. Nevertheless, evidence she brings to light reveals the extensive use of self-censorship and group censorship among veterans which would suggest a limited dialogue. Perhaps we need to distinguish between when a veteran spoke or acted as a Spanienkämpfer and when he or she spoke as a party functionary if these two can in fact be divided. Additionally, the veterans' participation and attitudes towards antifascist pedagogy is alluded to in this work, but not fully investigated. The question remains whether or not Spanienkämpfer supported the one-dimensional and politically correct story of the German volunteers when they came into contact with young people in school classrooms and in Pioneer, FDJ and Jugendweihe activities. One can assume that they did not share stories about drinking and using prostitutes, but did young people’s conceptions of the antifascist hero fade with the veterans’ realistic admissions of fear and the discomforts of army life? The number of antifascist veterans who volunteered in this capacity was much higher than the number seeking to publish their memoirs or literary accounts. How did average veterans react to GDR commemorative rituals and trends in antifascist pedagogy, such as the naming of schools after antifascist resistance figures?

Overall, however, McLellan’s monograph provides an excellent correction to the tendency to treat the SED and antifascist activists of the same political persuasion as a monolithic group. Lingering questions confirm the value and depth of McLellan’s chosen subject matter and the complex web of often shared goals and competing memories and strategies of antifascist veterans and party activists.

Note


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11235

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.