



Rehashing the Lies

Comrades and Commissars. The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War. By Cecil Eby. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.

By Grover Furr

On page 356 of this book, Cecil Eby recommends one account of ALB Commander Robert Merriman's death as "the most objective." It is the *only* time Eby shows any concern with objectivity—the careful evaluation of often contradictory evidence. Elsewhere Eby ignores the well-known canons of historian research. Absent a devotion to objectivity, any historian's bias must overwhelm him, as Eby's does here.

Much of the text is taken from Eby's 1969 book *Between the Bullet and the Lie*. Though the author has added much more material, the basic framework remains the same. Unfortunately, so do the errors of methodology and bias that fatally marred the earlier work.

Eby sets out to write an explicitly anticommunist work. He culls through many works, mainly memoir accounts, to select those that put the Soviets, the International Brigades, and communists generally in a negative light.

But memoir accounts conflict with one another. Furthermore, memories are not like photographs. With the passage of time they change, recreate themselves. Often people come to believe they witnessed and experienced things that never happened. Eby relies heavily on the work of William Herrick, whose book is full of

falsehoods; on Ronald Radosh, whose commentary often flagrantly contradicts the very evidence he cites; on Robert Gladnick, also a bitter anticommunist. These and, in fact, all accounts beg for critical scrutiny.

Eby also cites as fact testimony from the Subversive Activities Control Board, HUAC hearings, and Francoist historians. Such sources—like *all* sources—cry out for critical assessment. They get none here.

When it suits his purposes, Eby reports rumor and allegation as fact. Apparently he did not find enough such rumors, for in addition he lards his account with many cynical remarks, sarcasm and "cheap shots."

Whole pages have no citations at all, so generally we don't know where Eby got his assertions of fact, let alone how to assess their accuracy. This leaves him free to select those that best fit his own biases. Without objective criteria, that's all that's left.

Here are a few cases of outright fraud:

- On pages 189-190 Eby states, without citation, that Lincoln Battalion commander Oliver Law led his men into "ambushes." This assertion is made only by Herrick, who claimed one of Hy Stone's brothers was killed in one such ambush. This is impossible, since neither brother was with the Lincolns.

Of course Eby knows this, for elsewhere he cites the sources that document it. So why does he repeat this falsehood? Out of loyalty to Herrick, a fellow anticommunist and

his close friend for 35 years? Whatever the reason, it's a good example of why objectivity is so vital to any historian.

- Eby charges Peter Carroll with "scholarly malpractice" (p. 427), citing John Haynes's and Harvey Klehr's claim that the US government never referred to ALB vets as "premature anti-Fascists" (*New Criterion*, 09.02). But why doesn't he tell his readers of Carroll's response (with Daniel Bertwell) in *The Volunteer* of December '03, where a U.S. Congressman is quoted using the phrase on January 2, 1945? Because most readers will not know about it?

- Eby cites Gerald Howson's remark that Joseph Stalin referred to the Comintern as a "shop of cheap goods" (lavochnka). But Howson cites no evidence for this assertion. This tale has been traced to Soviet NKVD defector Walter Krivitsky (Paul Flowers to H-RUSSIA July 20, 2000, <http://tinyurl.com/378267>) whose book was heavily ghost-written by professional anticommunist publicist Isaac Don Levine (Gary Kern, *A Death in Washington*). Evidently Stalin never said it! But it makes the whole internationalist effort, of which the ALB was a part, look like a swindle.

If you don't try to discover the truth from the beginning, you are not going to stumble upon it by accident along the way. Eby's book will no doubt be employed as a fount of anti-communist propaganda. But it is worthless as history. What a pity—and what a waste! ■

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