

**REVIEW: Gabriel Pretus, *Humanitarian Relief in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)*, Lewiston, The Edwin Mellen Press, 2013; 424 pp.; ISBN 9780773445291**

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The Spanish Civil War has often been presented as “trial run” for what was to follow during the Second World War, with the large-scale aerial bombardment of cities, mass movement of refugees and political repression from both right and left foreshadowing developments in European history over the following decade.<sup>1</sup>

Recent historiography has also highlighted innovations in medical services, including public health provision, the organisation of frontline healthcare and the involvement of international medical volunteers, and the treatment of war wounds.<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Pretus’ study adds to this body of work by examining the role of non-partisan international charities in the provision of humanitarian relief during the conflict, which laid the foundations for many of the developments in relief work that were to take place during and after the Second World War.

Whilst much international humanitarian support was coordinated by organisations aligned to the Republican cause such as Britain’s Spanish Medical Aid Committee, Pretus examines the relief provided on both sides of the conflict by the British and American Quakers, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Save the Children Fund and Save the Children International Union, the Geneva-based Service Civil International, and the International Commission for the

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<sup>1</sup> Amongst the vast literature on the Spanish civil war, recent highlights include Helen Graham, *The War and its Shadow: Spain’s Civil War in Europe’s Long Twentieth Century* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2012); Stanley Payne, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (London: Harper Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Josep Barona and Enrique Perdiguero-Gil, ‘Health and the war: changing schemes and health conditions during the Spanish civil war’, *Dynamis*, 28 (2008), pp. 103-126; Nicholas Coni, *Medicine and Warfare: Spain, 1936-39* (Abdingdon: Routledge, 2008); Linda Palfreeman, *Salud! British Volunteers in the Republican Medical Service during the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2012); Eric R. Smith, *American Relief Aid in the Spanish Civil War* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2013).

Assistance of Child Refugees in Spain. In addition to the vital provision of food supplies to civilians on both sides, these organisations were involved in running hospitals and child health centres, the care of refugees, protection of prisoners of war and arranging prisoner swaps. Pretus provides a detailed and comprehensive overview of their activities, as well as examining the ways they interacted with each other and with the political authorities in both zones.

Unlike other works in the field, Pretus argues that the Nationalist authorities were often more open to collaboration with these organisations than was the Republican government. Nationalist welfare provision was well-organised and structured around the *Auxilio Social* whose leaders forged strong ties with the representatives of the international humanitarian bodies. In contrast, the division of authority between central and local government, competing political factions and different ministries made coordination extremely difficult in the Republican zone, as did an attitude of mistrust and the suspicion that humanitarian organisations would be used as a front for the entry of “undesirable” elements disguised as relief workers.

Whilst this argument provides an interesting perspective in a field which often dismisses any positive work carried out by the Nationalist authorities, Pretus’ argument sometimes verges on the polemical and potentially risks overstating both the positive approach of the Nationalists and the perfidy of the Republican government. He cites a number of cases of Republican authorities placing political interests before those of children or refugees, such as the selection of evacuees and recipients of relief on the basis of their political ties, or the refusal to agree to the creation of a neutral zone for the care of children because of a reluctance to negotiate with the Nationalist authorities. On the other hand the positive accounts given by the American Quaker Wilfred Jones of the non-partisan approach of *Auxilio Social* are presented unquestioningly, as is his assertion that they made no distinction between Nationalists and Republicans in the provision of support. Given the systematic repression and mistreatment of Republican sympathisers and their families by the Franco regime both during and after the Civil War which has been well documented by historians over the past two decades, such an account should be approached critically.

A similar issue arises in chapter seven, which despite not fitting neatly into the overall structure of the work provides a fascinating new account of the evacuation of Basque children to England in 1937. Pretus shows that many of the international humanitarian agencies, as well as representatives of the Spanish Republican, Basque and British governments, opposed the proposals for a mass evacuation on the grounds of the long-term negative impact it was likely to have on the children involved. However, it was eventually pushed through after the bombing of Guernica under pressure from the Basque government and pro-Republican groups in Britain who, Pretus argues, placed their political goal of encouraging British involvement in the conflict ahead of the real interests of the Basque children and their families. He presents the alternative suggested by Franco, namely the creation of a neutral zone to the west of Bilbao under the auspices of the Red Cross, as a viable alternative that was dismissed ‘without sound supporting arguments’<sup>3</sup> by the Basque leader Aguirre. However, he states elsewhere that the Basque government rejected the idea primarily because they didn’t trust Franco to implement it in good faith, a decision which seems eminently reasonable given that the offer followed the destruction of Guernica by Franco’s forces and its claims that the attack had been carried out by the Basques themselves for propaganda purposes.

Despite these issues Pretus’ work is both comprehensive and original, and is particularly distinguished by the wide range of previously unexplored primary source material that it draws on. It makes a valuable contribution not only to the scholarship of the Spanish Civil War, but also to the burgeoning literature on the development of humanitarianism and international relief work in Europe during the twentieth century.

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<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Pretus, *Humanitarian Relief in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), p. 134.