

*Comrades and Commissars: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War.* By Cecil D. Eby. University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007. ISBN 0-271-02910-2. Maps. Photographs. Appendixes. Bibliography. Notes. Index. Pp. 490. \$45.95 (hb).

The Spanish Civil War has its share of legends, one of the more durable being that the soldiers of the International Brigades went to Spain solely to make a valiant “first stand” against fascism and that the “Internationals” were prized shock troops who got along famously with their Spanish comrades who eagerly volunteered to fight with them.

In the 1960s, Cecil D. Eby examined the record of the American unit in the International Brigades, the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, and found that this legend was based more on agitprop and wishful thinking than demonstrable historical facts. In 1969, he revealed his findings in *Between the Bullet and the Lie*, a book that earned him the undying enmity of many of the Battalion’s veterans and those historians who continued to print the legends.

Rather than close Dr. Eby’s experience with the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, *Between the Bullet and the Lie* perpetuated it. Many with first-hand knowledge of the Battalion and the International Brigades contacted him. These accounts and new sources of information, including the discovery of the Battalion’s archives, enticed Dr. Eby to return to the Battalion’s story.

The result of this new research is a detailed, forthright, and empathetic account of the short, but active life of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, set masterfully in the larger *Book Reviews* context of the Spanish Civil War and the politics of the American Left in the 1930s. Eby takes a wide view of the Battalion’s history, from its recruitment from the ranks of the American Left (initial volunteers included hard-boiled labor activists and committed young intellectuals) to its bloody battles, from its members’ escapes after the collapse of Republican Spain through the decades of mythologizing of its role in the Spanish Civil War and the cause of anti-fascism.

Dr. Eby’s account is as unflinching as it is comprehensive. He frankly describes how the Battalion’s less than rudimentary training, shoddy equipment, and frequently inept leadership led to tragic consequences on the battlefield. He also dispassionately dismantles many of the myths associated with the Battalion. For example, Spaniards were reluctant to serve with the Battalion because Nationalists allegedly shot any “Internationals” they captured. He forthrightly depicts the fractious political situation within the Republican camp and shows how, as the pro-Soviet faction gained ascendancy, it became characterized by strident demands for strict ideological loyalty and harsh punishments for political deviation.

While he unsparingly criticizes the bungling commanders, inflexible commissars, and ruthless apparatchiks who plagued the Battalion (from within and without), Dr. Eby has an abundant respect for the men who filled its ranks and executed their duties with courage, determination, and grit—and he pays them the supreme compliment of providing an exceptionally honest account of their travails in Spain.

Military historians who are interested in writing unit histories will find *Comrades and Commissars* at once instructive and inspiring. Those teaching graduate and undergraduate level courses on the Spanish Civil War and the conflicts of the 1930s will find it to be a useful text in their classes.