

Karl D. Qualls: Stalin's Niños. Educating Spanish Civil War Refugee Children in the Soviet Union, 1937–1951, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020, 243 pp.

Reviewed by
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The story of the almost 3,000 Spanish children evacuated to the Soviet Union during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) is one of the facets of the conflict that has generated so much literature that the evacuation could be considered one of the great myths of the post-war period and the democratic restoration of Spain. The Franco regime used the idea of children “stolen” and “enslaved” in Russia by the “reds”, while democracy regarded them as lost and later recovered citizens, the last representatives of a lost and distant republic. Throughout the large body of literature, however, an exhaustive work on the schools-residences that took in the children was lacking. What we knew about them was, above all, through the memories of the protagonists themselves. Karl D. Qualls provides in this book a fresh insight into the history of “a Soviet education”, drawing on both Spanish and Soviet archives.

The book explores “the lived experience of the Spanish refugee children and how they were educated and raised by the Soviets”. After two chapters about their displacement from Spain and settling in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), chapters 3 and 4 focus on the schools and

the educational techniques for becoming Soviets – and Spaniards. The last two chapters analyse the dreadful and horrific times of the Second World War, when the evacuation of the Spanish boarding schools brought to an end the comfortable life of the children and forced them to deal with the upheavals of war. The last pages of this part examine the lives of the children during their transition to adulthood in the turbulent times of reconstruction. A short chapter examines the afterlife of the Spanish community in the USSR, especially when, after Stalin’s death, they were faced with the choice of staying or returning to Franco’s Spain. This period of the children’s lives is surprisingly studied very little – especially in relation to those who remained and lived their lives as Soviet citizens – and Qualls’s book, for obvious reasons of its overall focus, does not get into this.

Qualls’s success is to introduce the history of the refugee children in a much larger and more relevant context. In this way, the mere anecdote of the solidarity of the Soviet Union with a country at war and with some refugees who after only two years would lose the possibility of returning to their homeland becomes a “part of a Pan-European modernization process”. Schools for Spanish children were not an isolated phenomenon: there was already an educational model of ethnic minorities throughout the entire USSR, in which the language of instruction was their own and what counted was the internationalization of certain rules, ideological assumptions, and construction of community or nationalist sentiments. This is what served to turn the children into Soviets, as was the case for the rest of the national minorities

of the USSR. In this sense, the children who were educated in a Soviet-Spanish duality were transformed into finished products of hybridization that maintained two types of identification with two different cultural discursive formations. Education in those schools made them Soviet while framing them as Spaniards. According to Qualls, the Soviets tried to build establish “Hispanidad”, a homogeneous Spanish identity, above the regional differences of the children, being in a way equivalent to the Soviet identity, which included – but did not eliminate – the ethnic and cultural diversities of minorities.

Qualls uses the concept of “double assimilation”, borrowed from Francine Hirsch, to tell us about the heterogeneity and ambiguity of many Stalinist policies. Despite vacillating between internationalism and Russocentrism, the truth is that the USSR never completely discarded the more ideological aspects of its conformation as a socialist state. In a strange way, the Soviets were able to fuse two forms of national identification together. This is a perfect instrument to those researchers on nationalism who want to avoid the nationalist framework and go beyond nationalist narratives.

In his short reference to the return of the refugees from 1956, Qualls seems to share the vision of a backward Spain that the children themselves had. If – as Qualls affirms – the history of children serves to “understand the USSR as a modern state, not one outside the history of twentieth-century Western models of development” (p. 163), it is not clear in the book how Spain also, especially in those years in which the children returned, was visibly

modernizing itself. This modernization, whether explicit or not, would lead, for example, the Communist Party of Spain to change its own policies, realizing that Francoism was not going to disappear soon enough and that they should start looking for solutions for a modern, (let’s call it) “post-fascist”, society.

The book contains a few tiny errors, with the most of them regarding the assessment of Spanish history. Gernika was not then – nor now – the capital of the Basque Country (p. 3), but a symbolic locality of Biscayan culture and, by extension, of Basque nationalism. The Basque Communist Party was never “pro-Catholic” (p. 10) but quite the contrary. I suppose that Qualls refers to the Basque Nationalist Party, the then hegemonic party in the Basque rural environment, being anti-Spanish, but radically religious. This and other small flaws do not alter the enormous value of a book that has managed to put a story in a theoretical and methodological environment that, at first glance, might seem anecdotal. And this testifies once again to how strange it turns out that international historiography has not taken more seriously the possibilities of the case study of the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship – after all, being the longest-lasting fascist regime in Europe – as an extraordinarily illustrative example to explore various issues in the struggle between totalitarianism and democracy in the middle years of the twentieth century. Qualls has taken it seriously, and his work opens new doors for a more comprehensive evaluation of a phenomenon – the Spanish path to fascism – that, even today, produces reverberations.