

The Battle for Spain - The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939 by Antony Beevor.
Weidenfeld and Nicolson 2006.

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the start of the Spanish Civil War, a conflict that not only caused tremendous suffering and upheaval in Spain itself, but provided a training ground for the forces of Nazi Germany who would soon unleash a tidal wave of death and misery on the world.

Those who have known no other Spain than that of King Juan Carlos cannot imagine what that country was like under the rule of El Caudillo, General Franco, the fascist leader whose nationalist forces emerged victorious from the civil war, or find it easy to accept that Franco's rule survived the defeat of the Axis powers through a cleverly maintained neutrality.

Antony Beevor, thanks largely to his superb books on Berlin and Stalingrad, has established himself at the front of the front rank of military historians, and the Battle for Spain, a revision of a book originally published in 1982, gives a further justification for that status. Beevor has incorporated a great deal of material uncovered since 1982, making an already interesting episode absolutely fascinating.

The Battle for Spain is rich in events and individuals, many of them well known to students of the period. What makes this new edition so fascinating is that - with some distance from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the destruction in Europe of the credibility of Communism - it serves as an eloquent reminder of the destabilisation in contemporary European politics caused by the competition between right and left wing ideologies and ideologues.

The Battle for Spain is a weighty tome, in every sense, full of meticulously researched detail and a sometimes bewildering array of acronyms, but above all it provides an enthralling account of a terrible three years in Spanish history, typified by a viciousness and brutality that were to become the norm in Europe until 1945.

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