The Spanish Civil War by Antony Beevor

A Complex Book On A Complex Conflict...

The Spanish Civil War is a compelling account of one of the most hard-fought and bitter wars of the twentieth century: a war of atrocities and political genocide that was a military testing ground before the Second World War for the Russians, Italians, and Germans.

With his thorough and contemporary examination of the Spanish civil war, historian Antony Beevor unravels the complex events from the coup detat which started the war in July of 1936 to the final defeat of the Republicans in 1939. This highly readable account leaves out none of the familiar aspects, exploring them with a clear eye and providing important new insights into the war-its causes, course, and consequences.

My Personal Review:
More political history than battlefield history, Anthony Beevors recount of the Spanish Civil War is a complex look at the proxy war that took place in Spain just before the outbreak of the Second World War. A large portion of this book is devoted to the politics inside Spain both before and during the conflict, and the struggles within both sides, as the political realities of the mid- to late thirties in Spain forced some incompatible ideologies together, eventually leading to the demise of the Republican government.
The best thing about this book is that Beevor finds a way to break down the political struggle along three axes of conflict. While he often bounces back and forth from the battlefield to the political arenas while presenting mountains of complex information, he always finds a common thread and manages to pull all the facts presented back into the theme presented in a given chapter.
Beevors sympathies seem to lie with the Anarchists, though it seems that this is more a result of the fact that the Communists and the Fascists had foreign support from governments which history shows were less than benevolent. The Anarchist cause is typically portrayed in a more sympathetic
light than the Communists and Fascists, whose aspirations were more totalitarian than the anarchists, who (at least as they are presented in this book) simply wanted the right to govern themselves. To his credit, however, he does not spare any party in the description of the murderous brutality between all participants. He takes extra time to explain the propaganda battle (a very important aspect of the conflict), from the atrocities committed against the Church to the efforts of both sides to win victories based on propaganda, rather than military, goals.

Some of the political conundrums of Spain in the 30s are also presented. One of the most interesting is the plight of the Anarchists. They had a massive party capable of wielding immense power, but since they rejected the idea of elections, they were reduced to being bystanders in the political world. The compromises they made once the war started, as a result of the aggressive nature of the Communists (backed by the Stalinist USSR), and the backlash against the Communists near the end of the conflict, are a couple of the major underlying themes of this book. Beevor explains it best when he says that The Nationalists defended a common view of the past; the Republican coalition in contrast, had widely differing visions of the future.

This is a very informative book, and the reader will take a lot of understanding away from it. I would, however recommend two things, the first of which is to read and bookmark the list of political parties and organizations on pages 285 through 287, before reading the rest of the book. The second is to take the time to write down the names of important individuals. This will significantly ease the readers efforts to remember the mass of information presented. While this book is roughly 285 pages long, it is a very long 285 pages, as previous reviewers have noted, and is not an easy read.

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