

MINE WERE OF TROUBLE

(PETER KEMP)

April 12, 2020

Among the many tools of the superbly effective Left propaganda machine, one of the most effective is its control of publishing. Leftists use this to ensure that innumerable books fitting the Left narrative stay in print indefinitely, primarily for use as indoctrination tools in schools, as a glance at any modern curriculum at any grade level will show you. On the other hand, books not fitting the Left narrative disappear—never republished, expensive to buy used, and impossible to read online because of the stupidly long terms of modern copyright law. Thus, the reprinting, by Mystery Grove Publishing, of this excellent book, by an Englishman who volunteered to fight for the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War, is a great service.

Peter Kemp was born in India in 1915; his father was a judge in what was then called Bombay. As I have covered at great length elsewhere, the Spanish situation deteriorated from 1933 through 1936 (really 1931 through 1936, as the Spanish Left attempted to consolidate permanent power). During this time, Kemp was studying at Cambridge to be a lawyer. His politics appear to have been quite conservative, but he makes only passing reference to his own beliefs. Kemp's main reason for going to Spain seems to have been a desire common among young men throughout history, to seek adventure through warfare, although he was also horrified at the widespread atrocities of the Spanish Left immediately prior to the Civil War. He acknowledges his desire in the title, which comes from an A. E. Housman poem used as an epigraph: "The thoughts of others / Were light and fleeting, / Of lover's meeting / Or luck, or fame / Mine were of trouble / And mine were steady, / So I was ready / When trouble came." If he had been a man of the Left, no doubt he would have joined the International Brigades, the collective organization of those non-Spaniards who fought for the Spanish Communists, the Republicans.

It would have been far easier and socially acceptable for him to join the Republicans, too, since they had an active, successful, and extremely well-funded propaganda operation that blanketed Europe, while the Nationalists made almost no effort to persuade others, aside from

occasionally arranging curated tours for newspapermen, incorrectly believing their cause was self-proving or that foreign opinion was unimportant. Thus, polite opinion in England favored the Republicans, something that troubled Kemp not at all. His complete lack of Spanish did not deter him either. And in those days before the overweening state presumed to dictate to us the smallest details of our lives, it was easy enough to go fight in a foreign war. True, as today, the Left was better organized, and every country in Europe had official, open recruiting stations for the International Brigades. Kemp simply got a letter from a newspaper editor friend saying that he was authorized to send back wire copy, as a cover story, and off he went across the French frontier.

This was November 1936. Kemp offers a thumbnail sketch of the first four months of the Civil War, which had passed by the time he arrived. At this point, Francisco Franco had not yet assumed supreme command, nor had he amalgamated the different political factions of the Nationalists under his personal control. As a result, the Nationalist military was organized in a fragmented and ad hoc manner. (The Republican military was too, but the Nationalists were much better as the war progressed at welding together the disparate components of their forces, helped by not being subject to the Moscow-directed purging that bled the Republicans.) The core of the Nationalist fighting forces was the Army of Africa, consisting of most of Spain's land forces that actually had experience fighting. One part of this was the Spanish Foreign Legion (which meant Spaniards fighting abroad, in Africa; it was not a collective of foreigners, like the French Foreign Legion). The other was native Moroccans, the Regulares. Two political parties also raised separate forces. The first was the Carlists, one branch of the Spanish monarchists (favoring a king other than Alfonso XIII, who had resigned in 1931 to avoid the civil war being fomented by the Left). The Carlists were dominant in the north of Spain, in Navarre and the Basque provinces, and were old-fashioned, happy to die for King and country. The second was the Falange, the small Spanish fascist political party, who had little in common politically with the Carlists (and in fact in later years squabbled violently with the Carlists). Franco, of course, was not a fascist or a member of the Falange; most Nationalist military officers were not political.

Kemp joined the Carlist forces, the *Requetés*. The Falange Kemp treats with some disdain; he seems to regard them as less than competent, brave enough but prone to scheming in preference to honest fighting, and too often substituting ideology for honor. And he was warned away from joining the Legion, which was regarded as extremely tough and demanding, and less than welcoming to a foreigner who spoke no Spanish. So the Carlists it was, and they were very welcoming, if highly informal, bordering on lax, in their organization.

From here, *Mine Were of Trouble* is personal narrative of Kemp's experiences. For the most part, the Spaniards were glad to have him fighting with them, though sometimes he was the target of suspicion from military bureaucrats. He fought with the Carlists in various skirmishes and battles, including the Battle of Jarama (February 1937) and the Battle of Santander (July 1937). He very much enjoyed his time with the Carlists, and was quickly promoted to *alférez*, a junior officer rank, sometimes translated "sub-lieutenant," meaning in practice he commanded part of a platoon, apparently ten to twenty men at a time. But he disliked the Carlists' lack of discipline and technical training; they substituted suicidal courage for better entrenchments and the use of modern guns and gun techniques. Kemp wanted to learn "first-class soldiering." So late in 1937 he joined the Legion.

The Legion was divided into twenty *banderas*, and Kemp was assigned to the 14th, a new *bandera* composed of disparate parts. His welcome was frosty—he was viewed with suspicion, as a foreigner, and as a Protestant, something the Legionnaires associated with Freemasonry, one of the main avenues by which leftist poison had entered the Spanish body politic. Still, using time-honored tools to overcome such military suspicion, hard work and bravery, Kemp soon enough became accepted by his men, and by most of the officers, even though some of the latter never warmed to him, less from suspicion and more because they felt he could never truly understand the existential evil of the Spanish Left, which drove many of them personally, since nearly all had had relatives murdered in Republican-held Spain. Kemp led a machine-gun platoon, with four obsolete guns with zero spare parts as their only rapid-fire weapons, so soon enough, it was three guns, and then one. In November 1937, his unit moved southeast, to the Guadalajara front close to Madrid, as the Nationalists successfully liberated more and more of Spain.

The book's narrative is compelling, and not just the battle scenes. Kemp does an excellent job of describing the landscape of the various areas in which he spent time, initially in the north, and later both west and east of Madrid. The reader gets a good feel, in particular, for the rugged nature of much of the terrain. He also describes the towns and villages in which he was billeted (as with most wars, waiting occupied much of his time), as well as their inhabitants, nearly all of whom strongly supported the Nationalists, both in general and especially after roving bands of Republican militias had come through early in the war, tortured the local priest to death, killed other citizens, and moved on. At no point does the book drag. You might even call it a page-turner.

Occasionally Kemp diverges to discuss events to which he was not personally a witness. Notably, he discusses the April 1937 bombing of Guernica, which took place not far from where he was then stationed, and was the supreme propaganda triumph of the Communists and their international supporters during the entire war. Kemp strongly believed that the Republicans burned the town themselves, as they had many other towns from which they had been expelled. That was the Nationalist line at the time, in opposition to the massive global campaign spreading the lie that the Nationalists, with the help of the Germans, had bombed a non-military target to terrorize the population. No doubt Guernica was a wholly legitimate target, and the bombing wholly appropriate, if not executed entirely competently. (Bombing civilian towns without a military presence was actually a Republican specialty; Kemp notes that early in the war, Toledo, a Nationalist town, had been so attacked.) But objective modern historians (as opposed to Communist mouthpieces like Paul Preston) generally conclude that the Nationalists were lying that the destruction was caused by the Republicans burning the town, in a crude and unsuccessful attempt to counter Republican propaganda.

Kemp offers all his experiences with no sugarcoating. In the Legion, there was extremely rigid discipline, with corporal punishment for minor infractions and the death penalty for any insubordination. The good result of this was that looting and rape, commonly committed by Republican forces, was nonexistent. The bad result was that in Kemp's *bandera*, though it was against Nationalist policy, many prisoners, and all of certain categories, were shot out of hand. Those categories included members of the International Brigades, blamed for prolonging the war

by preventing the early liberation of Madrid. Of course, Kemp would have been shot too if captured; he knew that at the time, and he quotes a British captain in the International Brigades whom he talked to after the war who leaves no doubt.

Early in the war, both the Republicans and the Nationalists took few prisoners, but by this point the Nationalists had mostly stopped that practice, and the Republicans, consistently losing, didn't capture that many fresh prisoners, having murdered most of them already, along with any Nationalists they could find in the cities, towns, and villages they controlled. (Kemp notes that when international bodies such as the Non-Intervention Commission began to organize prisoner exchanges, they found almost no Nationalist prisoners held by the Republicans, and large numbers of Republicans held by the Nationalists.) Tactically, of course, this is a poor decision—as Niall Ferguson wrote in *The Pity of War*, refusing to accept surrenders needlessly prolongs wars. Regardless, Kemp thought that his own superior officers were perniciously fond of killing prisoners, and relates at horrified length how an Irish deserter from the International Brigades presented himself, claiming he had been impressed into the Brigades. Kemp got permission from his immediate superiors to send the Irishman away as a POW, but the colonel above them curtly ordered Kemp to shoot the prisoner, which he did (or rather he had two of his men do it), something he found extremely difficult.

Back at the front, the war ground on and the Nationalists implemented Franco's slow strategy. (It was later called plodding and unimaginative, which perhaps it was, and also called an attempt to kill as many Communists as possible, which perhaps it also was. We'll never know; Franco was famously taciturn.) Kemp fought in the Battle of Teruel, which was bitter and more of the same, featuring hand-to-hand fighting in olive groves and the intermittent appearance of light tanks, often turning the tide at the last minute, including once when Kemp's unit was about to be overrun. Many of Kemp's friends died; he gives full credit to his opponents for bravery and competence.

He was stationed for a few weeks in Belchite, a village that had been destroyed earlier, which was left destroyed after the war and was used as the backdrop for the BBC series *The Spanish Civil War*. It is here, late in the book, where the most jarring passage of book occurs. Kemp relates how four Western journalist friends of his, two American and

two British, were driving near the battle when a shell hit their car. Three were killed. The fourth, the survivor, he mentions only here: Kim Philby. Of course, in 1957, when this book was published, Kemp could not have known that Philby, a traitor since the 1920s, was one of the most evil men of the twentieth century, responsible, directly or indirectly, for the deaths of millions. He was in Nationalist Spain masquerading as a journalist in order to spy for the Communists, and in fact this incident, since it brought him to the favorable attention of the Nationalist authorities, strengthened his ability to spy, bringing him into direct contact with Franco, with the goal of furthering Franco's assassination by the Communists. But Kemp knew none of this. It is strange how history works, and how it could have been different had we been more lucky, and Philby killed in 1937.

Kemp was wounded several times, and had to recuperate, but was back in action by May 1938. Not for long, though. Fighting near Aragon in July, a mortar bomb exploded next to him, shattering his jaw and hand, burning his throat, and nearly killing him. Recuperating for months, he asked permission for leave to return to England to convalesce, which was granted. First, however, Franco asked to see him, and he had a thirty-minute interview, consisting mostly of Franco talking about the dangers of Communism. Franco concluded by asking Kemp what he would do after the war, to which Kemp said presumably he would fight in the British military "in the coming war." Franco responded, with a "wintry smile," "I don't think there will be a war," to which Kemp's response was, "I wonder what he really thought." By March 1939, the Spanish war was over, and Kemp did not return to Spain for some time, although he fought with great distinction in World War II and thereafter. But that is another story, told by Kemp in other books.

Today, of course, the modern successors of the Spanish Communists would ensure that a man like Kemp had no peace after the guns fell silent. Those who fought for the International Brigades received nothing but lionization, and to this day are unjustly and foolishly praised, but even in his time, Kemp was threatened by his local police chief in England that he "might find [himself] liable to prosecution under the provisions of the Foreign Enlistment Act of 1880, or some such date." Kemp died in 1993, but we can be certain that if he had lived longer, the European Left, both in Spain and England, would have tried to prosecute him

as a “war criminal,” by which they mean any person who opposed their totalitarian aims of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I often complain about this, that the Left ensures that its enemies are hounded to the grave and beyond, while the Right fails to do the same and, an equally great failing, fails to fight back adequately. Maybe this is a historical anomaly and in the decades to come the roles will be reversed; one can hope.

You will not find here new lessons on the Spanish Civil War, but you will find lessons that are not commonly known. This book is interesting in its own right, and a quick read. I highly recommend it. Most of all, it’s a vivid exposure to the reality that the side that deserved to win the Civil War, and fortunately did, was the Nationalists, who bore little resemblance to the caricature that nearly a century of Left lies has planted in the rest of the West. More people should know this, and *Mine Were of Trouble* is a good place to start.