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Book Review: Olivia Muñoz-Rojas, *Ashes and Granite: Destruction and Reconstruction in the Spanish Civil War and Its Aftermath*

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Olivia Muñoz-Rojas, *Ashes and Granite: Destruction and Reconstruction in the Spanish Civil War and Its Aftermath*

Ashes and Granite: Destruction and Reconstruction in the Spanish Civil War and Its Aftermath by Olivia Muñoz-Rojas

Review by: Carola Hein

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Ashes and Granite: Destruction and Reconstruction in the Spanish Civil War and Its Aftermath. By *Olivia Muñoz-Rojas*. The Cañada Blanch/Sussex Academic Studies on Contemporary Spain. Edited by *Paul Preston*.

Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, in association with the Cañada Blanch Centre for Contemporary Spanish Studies, 2011. Pp. xxvi+224. £65.00.

Ashes and Granite by Olivia Muñoz-Rojas is a laudable attempt to fill the gap in the English-language research on rebuilding major urban centers after the Spanish Civil War. Studies on the rebuilding of Spanish cities after the Civil War (1936–39) in English are rare. The topic is a fascinating and resonant one, as the aerial destruction of Spanish cities preceded and prepared for German and Italian aerial attacks throughout the rest of Europe; and Spanish cities started to rebuild as early as 1940, the same year in which Rotterdam, London, and Warsaw sank into ruins.

Taking an interdisciplinary perspective—integrating political, social, and art historical approaches—the author investigates the destruction of Madrid, Bilbao, and Barcelona during the Civil War and the practical and symbolic arguments as well as tensions between multiple groups (including national and local governments) and examines how they shaped the reconstruction in the three cities under Franco’s regime.

Muñoz-Rojas starts by examining issues of war destruction and reconstruction historically and conceptually. Any discussion of such a wide-ranging topic needs to be highly selective in terms of space, time, and discipline. This approach helps to set a broader stage for a conversation on issues of destruction and rebuilding, notably during World War II; it also results in some omissions and inaccuracies in the details (e.g., the A-bomb dome in Hiroshima is not the only remaining prewar structure in the city [12]).

In chapter 2, Muñoz-Rojas introduces and describes the complicated mosaic of diverse actors in the Spanish Civil War through an urban lens. As the chapter explains, the Spanish Civil War was a complex event, pitting diverse groups and interests against each other. Key dynamics in the advent of the war were the modernization and industrialization of Spain, and traditional leaders’ fear of a socialist revolution. The nationalist rebel forces were led by General Franco and supported by conservative groups, monarchists, and the Fascist Falange. They deposed the elected government of the Spanish Republic after a several-year fight.

Madrid, Spain’s capital city, and Bilbao and Barcelona, the two capitals, respectively, of the Basque and Catalan nationalist movements (and the larger regions they represented) were important sites of resistance against the rebels. (It may come as a surprise to the international reader that the most famous event of the Civil War, the aerial bombing of Guernica—the topic of Pablo Picasso’s painting—is part of this book’s analysis only as a model of destruction feared by the citizens of Bilbao.) Each of the three cities had different reasons for their common fight against the rebel forces, which may have impeded their collaboration (19).

The strength of the book lies in its three detailed case studies, with one chapter dedicated to each city (chaps. 3–5). Each maps the political, social, and urban condition of a city before, during, and after the war. Madrid stands as an example of ambitious reconstruction plans that harked back to the golden age of the Hapsburg period. These attempts waned by the 1940s as Germany and Italy began to lose the war; and by the early 1950s even the author of this plan remarked on its weaknesses (67). One of the key sites of the Civil War, the Cuartel de la Montana, where the military coup orchestrated in 1936 by Franco’s supporters was crushed, was one of the key symbolic sites in the rebuilding discussion. By the 1960s, the area was still largely deserted and the city council opted to create a green space that would come to host the Nubian temple of Depod and

a monument to commemorate the fallen at the site, creating what Muñoz-Rojas calls a site of “rich historical paradoxes” (79).

In the case study of Bilbao, the author concentrates on the construction, destruction, and completion or rebuilding of the city’s drawbridges and the ideological implications of that process. These bridges connected the two riverbanks and linked the city to the larger region; they also represented the industrial leadership of the city. In the 1930s, several projects for the construction of new drawbridges in Bilbao were under way. In the face of the advancing forces, the local Basque government gave the order to blow up the bridges. Muñoz-Rojas then details the process of the reconstruction of the unfinished bridges and the multiple public and private, national and local actors involved. In regard to the rebuilding process, she usefully points out the necessary collaboration of the new political leadership and the Basque industrialists, as both depended on each other (113).

Finally, Barcelona here exemplifies how destruction catalyzed urban planning. The project for a broad, transversal avenue, the Avenue C, across the old district of Barcelona was proposed before the war and, despite the political and social changes due to the war, the avenue was built on ruined blocks (119). Though missing some key illustrations, these chapters provide important information and analysis for further, comparative study of rebuilding after World War II.

The conclusion provides a good overview of the entire book and demonstrates the complexity and difficulty of such interdisciplinary research. The text tantalizingly contains numerous insights that will help others make global comparisons. For example, Muñoz-Rojas quotes Falangist José María Pemán stating: “The fires of Irún, Guernica, or Lequetito, of Málaga or Baena, are like straw and stubble burning, leaving the soil fertilized for the new harvest,” creating an opportunity for happily filling the land “with imperial stones” (19, 20). We know from other research that similar quotes accompanied other visionary projects by architects and planners in war-destroyed cities from Berlin to Hiroshima, where the reality of rebuilding was very different. Comparative English-language literature on the rebuilding of cities after World War II—whether held by victors or the defeated—is still very limited. Most research on rebuilding is so far available only in local languages and publications. This book thus appropriately reminds us that a true comparative and interdisciplinary analysis of postwar rebuilding—taking into account broader approaches in architectural history, urban, and planning history on rebuilding efforts, and a methodology to support it—still needs to be developed.

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The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944–1947.

By *Martin Conway*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. x+415. \$150.00.

In almost every historical telling, the end of the Second World War forms a sharp break in time. Politics, social movements, and popular culture from 1945 onward were markedly different than before the war. What, however, would our histories be like if we focused on how much the end of the war led, not to decisive change, but a reassembling of old structures, a new pattern that was more an improved version of traditional forms than a radical break with the past? Such is the new interpretation that Martin Conway offers of Belgium in the immediate postwar years. His book provides a provocative model for