

Per IMERSLUND: *Un voluntario noruego en la Guerra Civil española*, edición a cargo de Mariano González Campo, Madrid, SND Editores, 2020, 224 pp., ISBN: 9788412212532.

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Criticising Franco from the Right

In 1937 an unknown photographer snapped a gang of Falange militiamen posing behind the lines in northern Córdoba. Most of them are short and dark, clowning around with wine bottles and straw hats, but one towers over his comrades and has to awkwardly bend at the hips to fit in the shot. The white-blond hair and somewhat delicate features make Per Imerslund look like a greyhound among a gang of alley mutts.

The Norwegian had entered Spain to report on the Civil War for a fistful of rightist publications and transitioned into a soldier in a fascist army. It seemed an obvious progression for an unapologetic National Socialist who had spent an adventurous life riding the Inca trails in Mexico, brawling alongside Brownshirts in Berlin, and storming Norway's literary world with a best-selling novel. Yet the move from journalist to Falangist was not entirely by choice and Imerslund's view of the Nationalist cause was more nuanced and less starry-eyed than might be expected. Ultimately the Spanish Civil War was, for this Norwegian at least, a deeply disillusioning experience.

Now SND Editores have assembled a collection of Imerslund's journalism from Spain that, despite its patchwork nature, gives us what is effectively a memoir of his experiences in the Nationalist zone. It's a nicely made paperback, although short at barely 200 pages with the first 30 or so pages being three separate introductions, of which Mariano González Campo's overview of Imerslund's life and Norwegian politics is the most useful. Presumably the book's production values owe something to the funding provided by Norwegian Literature Abroad, an organization with an interestingly broadminded approach as to which authors constitute a good advert for its country's achievements. There's a glossy photo section with well selected shots: a few book jackets and magazine covers, Imerslund in the Falange, Imerslund as boyishly handsome author, Imerslund wearing the Waffen-SS uniform he would die in as a collaborator during



the Second World War. Sparing footnotes untangle a few obscure references but mostly point out when Imerlund used original Spanish phrases in his text. The Norwegian had a significant advantage over many foreigners in that he spoke fluent Spanish from having been brought up in Mexico.

South America is where his fascist journey started. As a young teen he began a sexual relationship with his adult, male, imported, rightist German teacher. Today this would result in accusations of grooming and a long prison sentence but the past is a different country and the relationship seems to have been regarded as perfectly acceptable in the bohemian Imerlund household. Therapists could have a field day with the young man's subsequent pivot into the virile hyper-masculinity of fascism, although it's probably pushing things to assume that if he hadn't been raped as a teen then Imerlund would have become a caring social worker who adopted orphaned bunny rabbits. Not many bright young men who liked to travel managed to avoid political extremes in the interwar years.

A far-right position was no obstacle to literary success in 1930s Norway and Imerlund's photogenic face was briefly everywhere in his homeland before he dropped the books, got married, and became a full-time political activist. Part of the reason he ended up in Spain was to avoid some unwelcome police attention over his involvement in the burglary of Leon Trotsky's house by Norwegian fascists. The veteran Bolshevik was skulking near Oslo after losing a power struggle with Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin and a local far-right gang disapproved of his presence enough to barge their way into the house posing as policemen. Prompted by Imerlund, they hoped to find papers that would prove the Russian was fermenting unrest. Nothing too incriminating turned up but Trotsky moved on to Mexico and a date with an ice pick while Per Imerlund laid low to avoid any awkward questions from the police. He spent his time reading about a gang of rogue Spanish generals who had recently tried to overthrow their leftist government and pitched the country into civil war.

A conservative newspaper agreed to fund a journalistic visit to Spain, which began with Imerlund getting imprisoned by the nervy Portuguese authorities in Lisbon. He writes vividly of the squalid conditions in his first piece of journalism («a terrible stench [...] bearded and long-haired individuals stretching their arms through the bars») but has a surprisingly pleasant time after being befriended by an imprisoned aristocrat who gets his meals, with wine, sent in from a nearby restaurant. Imerlund is soon freed and crosses the border into Salamanca to spend his time drinking coffee with the local Falangists and watching Moroccans just back from the battlefield limp around town with unreadable faces. He dismisses Carlist propaganda as unimaginative and elitist, mostly because its Christian iconography offends this pagan worshipper of the old Norse gods, but admires the Falange's anti-Semitic, anti-monarchist, and anti-

capitalist posters. A fascist friend wrongly claims «[Nationalist leader Francisco] Franco is becoming more and more Falangist».

Imerlsund leaves Salamanca to flit around the Nationalist zone writing articles. He interviews Falange officials, reports on news from the front, passes through endless villages of white houses, writes up Republican war crimes, watches a captured militiaman sentenced to death («everyone knows that the man will be shot,» Imerlsund says, «the case is clear»), writes a friendly open letter to the German teacher who raped him all those years ago, talks with a cheerful Nationalist officer in Málaga who claims the enemy lost the city because they were too lazy to dig trenches, and meets a handful of the twenty or so Norwegians who had joined the Nationalist forces. More of his fellow countrymen would have enlisted if the Nasjonal Samling, Norway's biggest fascist party, hadn't made efforts to hold back their militants from the mincing machine of the Civil War. Vidkun Quisling even threatened to expel members who fought for Franco. Other European far-right parties were equally unenthusiastic about losing members to a cause they otherwise supported: British Union of Fascists (BUF) leader Sir Oswald Mosley declared "Spain is not worth one drop of British blood!" while, in France, Jacques Doriot's Parti Populaire Français and De La Rocque's Parti Social Français also forbade followers from joining, as did the Légion Nationale and Rexists of Belgium.

A few disobeyed and came to Spain –such as the BUF's Peter Keen from South London and the Légion Nationale militant Paul Kehren, a champion motorcyclist back home– but most foreign volunteers who joined the Nationalists were Conservative Christians fighting for a reactionary, imperialist Right. Men like that enlisted in the Carlists or the Foreign Legion and disapproved of Falangist radicalism. Imerlsund knew their views were far closer to those of the Nationalist leadership than his own and that, in the broadest sense, the Civil War was essentially «a battle of Whites against Reds, as in old Russia». But as late as the winter of 1937 he still believed the Falange's revolutionary fascism would break through to mold the post-war state. His articles in the far-right Norwegian magazine *Ragnarok* heavily imply that Franco would only survive as leader if he accepted the Falange's political authority. Not the best prediction to be making at a time when Franco had already forcibly united the movement with the Carlists and rinsed the resulting Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista of any ideological complexity. The Norwegian's Nazi views blinded him to reality.

This blindness is even more surprising considering that by the time he wrote those articles, Imerlsund had already served in the Falange militia and returned to Norway, sick and disillusioned. He had not intended to join the fighting but in February the Norwegian newspaper which had been bankrolling his travels terminated the contract without notice. Imerlsund only found out when the money failed to arrive at a Málaga bank. Funds soon ran low and a fellow Norwegian suggested he enlist.

Imerslund signed up with a Falange militia unit and on 12 April found himself stationed near Villa Nueva del Duque, northern Córdoba, Andalusia.

The articles about his experiences in the front line are, understandably, among the most vivid of the pieces in the book. Imerslund nervously drinks wine from a flask while discussing philosophy with a young student, sings with his comrades on the truck taking them to the battle, watches them pray in a church while the village girls crowd the doors to get a glimpse of the young soldiers. He is journalist enough to record the older women sadly murmuring behind their headscarves «So young! So young! And they never come back!» while knowing their words are also directed at him.

But any action the Norwegian faces on his first trip into the trenches goes mostly unrecorded in any great detail. He writes: «I felt like a front-line soldier who when he comes home on leave and goes to tell his experiences to his friends but can only say: There is nothing to talk about». Soon he and his Falange friends are on leave behind the lines drinking too much, watching girls dance in clubs, and nearly getting into fights with dismissive Italians who treat Spain like a colonial war. Imerslund's Spanish journalism diverts into an in-depth look at the Italians (arrogant and unprofessional) and Germans (arrogant and professional) who have been sent to the Civil War by their governments to show fascist solidarity.

Later articles look at life on the battlefield with its bombing raids, blasting machineguns, and friendly meetings with Republicans in no-man's-land to exchange wine and tobacco where both sides confide they hate the officers behind the lines more than the enemy. Imerslund came down with a recurrence of malaria, originally contracted in Mexico, and was invalided out. Back in Norway he wrote articles for *Ragnarok* that openly criticised Franco for taking over the Falange and ignoring its ideology: «[He] has destroyed the only instrument that could have turned his military soldiers into an army of political soldiers».

Franco and his generals didn't care about the opinions of a lone, bisexual, disillusioned Norwegian Nazi. The Nationalists would win the war in 1939 and establish a reactionary Catholic dictatorship, much closer to Carlism than National-Syndicalism but with the monarchy politely but rigorously excluded. Falangists retained some hope of using a Nazi victory in the Second World War to impose their ideology on Spain but the defeat of the Axis Forces in 1945 ended that dream. By then Imerslund was dead. After the German occupation of Norway and subsequent invasion of the Soviet Union, he joined Hitler's Waffen-SS as a war correspondent in search of the pan-Germanic spirit that Vidkun Quisling, now collaborationist leader of his country, boasted was motivating the occupiers. He failed to find it.

«Every tie, every connection, between German and Norwegian is lacking», Imerslund wrote bitterly to friends. He became as disillusioned with Adolf Hitler as he had been with Franco. On leave in Norway, he plotted with *Ragnarok* comrades to

kidnap Quisling and assassinate senior German officials in Oslo. The resistance was contacted but refused to help. Imerlund's ultimate goal is unclear but some believe he wanted a fascist Norway to continue the fight against the Soviet Union independently of Nazi Germany. Not a wise plan and one clearly born of desperation. What was left of the plot fell apart in 1943 when Imerlund was seriously injured on the Eastern Front and died that December at Oslo's Aker University Hospital.

Un voluntario noruego en la Guerra Civil española is a fascinating read for anyone obsessed by far-right Scandinavian adventurers with unconventional sex lives. For everyone else, it's a generally interesting collection of propaganda pieces written to promote the Falange which most vividly comes to life when Imerlund is at the centre of the story in a Portuguese prison cell or the front lines in northern Córdoba. It's a shame he never wrote a honest memoir of his time in Spain –he might have discussed his real feelings about seeing fascism in action and revealed all the bloody horrors of the Spanish Civil War which were usually omitted from his articles. However, the propagandist ghost of Per Imerlund, peering down from Valhalla or somewhere adjacent, probably disagrees.