"Hell and Good Company": Vivid portrait of Spanish Civil War

"Hell and Good Company" by Richard Rhodes. (From the book cover)

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Hell and Good Company

The Spanish Civil War and the World It Made

By Richard Rhodes

Simon & Schuster.

304 pages. $30

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

"I've got to go to Spain," Ernest Hemingway told Maxwell Perkins, his editor, in December 1936. "But there's no great..."
hurry. They'll be fighting for a long time, and it's cold as hell around Madrid now." Hemingway was right. The Spanish Civil War did not end until well into 1938. When it was over, half a million Spaniards, of a population of 24 million, had perished.

In *Hell and Good Company*, Richard Rhodes, author of two dozen books, including *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, provides an evocative account of a conflict widely recognized as a dress rehearsal for World War II. The outcome, Rhodes reminds us, was never really in doubt. With Western democracies standing on the sidelines and Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union "in full withdrawal," the republican government of Spain (and its international brigades of liberal and communist volunteers, including the Abraham Lincoln Brigade) could not prevail against the nationalists, "not with Italy and Germany supplying Franco" with soldiers, ammunition, tanks, and planes.

Rhodes' narrative captures the temper of a war that, for good and ill, introduced breakthroughs in military tactics, medical technology, art, and literature. "Bombing civilians to spread terror," he writes, became a mainstay of air-power theory. The war may also have seen the first professional war-ready, refrigeration-equipped, blood transfusion service in history.

There is also an illuminating examination of the two monumental artistic encounters with violence and suffering inspired by the war, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* and Joan Miró's *Catalan Peasant in Revolt (The Reaper)*. The Spanish government insisted on paying for *Guernica*, which remained on display at the Museum of Modern Art until 1981, well after Franco's and Picasso's deaths, when it was returned to Spain. Sadly, Miró's mural was sent to Valencia, where its Masonite panels were lost.

Rhodes struggles to understand whether any war, "even that first desperate war against fascism," is worth it. He leaves his readers with the reflections of Patience Darton, a nurse whose lover, Robert Aaquist, was killed by a mine in 1938. He was, she wrote, "a revelation of how to live and fight against" the enemies of human dignity, the forces that are "trying to ruin the world."

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