Abstract

Hostile notices—however maliciously lopsided and carefully wounding—are normally not worth the bother of a reply. Fair-minded readers can be left to arbitrate between the text and the reviewer for themselves. But in the case of John Saville’s curiously crude mishandling and venomously wilful misjudging in the last number of the Socialist Register 1981, of my 1980 Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse some riposte is called for. The more personal insults that Saville feels licensed liberally to sprinkle around—about my so-called paranoia, gormlessness, nasty schoolboyishness, bumbling, ignorance of life, and the rest—I ignore because they are as much beyond rational debate as they are beneath contempt. But Saville does also make serious allegations about careless and/or deliberate distortions of historical fact: and enough of them as to make any standing on dignity in these matters look like an acknowledgement by me that he’s proved his points. What’s more, the sorts of point about facts and interpretations of fact that Saville raises are also more generally interesting because of what they reveal about the way Thirties’ issues are still alive and continuing and about the way ideological assumptions, prejudices, preferences and prescriptions penetrate deeply into all reading and writing of history—even such sturdily confident data-wielding and prejudice rebutting reading as Saville purports to go in for on this occasion.
The Spanish Civil War was fought from 17 July 1936 to 1 April 1939 between the Republicans, who were loyal to the established Spanish Republic, and the Nationalists, a rebel group led by General Francisco Franco. The Nationalists prevailed, and Franco ruled Spain for the next 36 years, from 1939 until his death in 1975. Girl snipers, fighting for the government, during the Spanish Civil War. (Photo by Keystone/Getty Images). 1936. Refugees from the Spanish Civil War crowd the roads to Perpignan at Le Perthus, France. (Photo by Three Lions/Getty Images). 1936. A Spanish government soldier...